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NOVEMBER 2004

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in New Orleans

By RHYS BOWEN

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D.H. Reddall  
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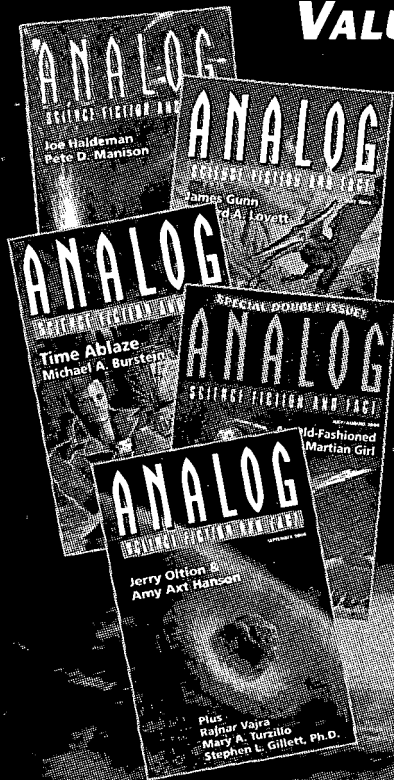
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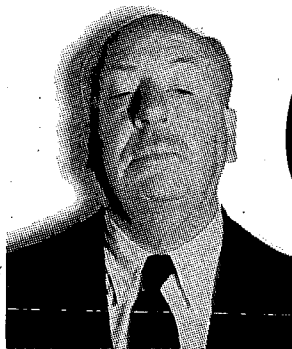
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November 2004

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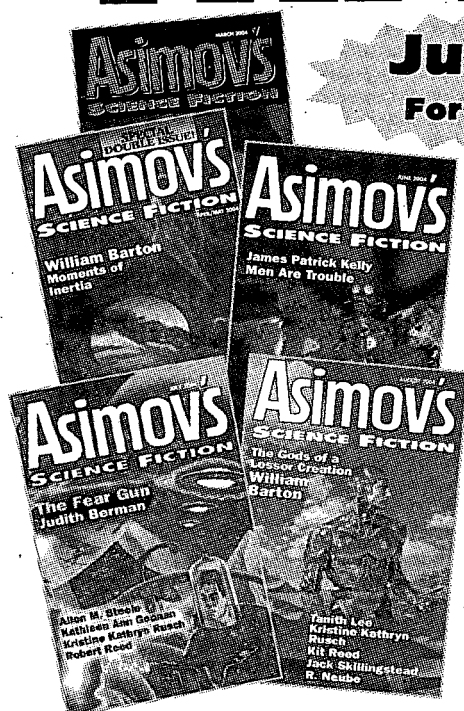
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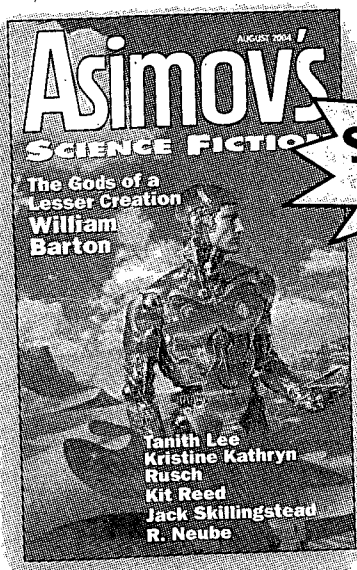
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## EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

## NEW FACES, OLD FRIENDS

In addition to several of our favorite AHMM writers, we welcome three new authors to these pages this month, Rhys Bowen, Joan Druett, and David Grace.

Though new to us, Ms. Bowen is no stranger to mystery fans. Readers have long flocked to her popular Constable Evans books, set in northern Wales; for these books, Ms. Bowen draws inspiration from her own childhood memories of the area. More recently, she has launched a series set in late-nineteenth-century New York City; these books feature Molly Murphy, an Irish immigrant who landed alone and penniless in New York in *Murphy's Law* (2001), but who has made her way by her ingenuity and nerve. The most recent in this series, *For the Love of Mike*, was published by St. Martin's Minotaur in December 2003. Ms. Bowen is also serving a term as president of the Northern California chapter of Mystery Writers of America. She gives us some of her thoughts about juggling two very different series and writing in general in our conversation with her following her story in this issue, "Voodoo."

Joan Druett, a native of New Zealand, is well known for her nautical nonfiction (*In the Wake of Madness: The Murderous Voyage of the Whaleship Sharon, 1841-1845*) as well as her historical novels. Just out in October, *A Watery Grave* (St. Martin's Minotaur) introduces a unique sleuth: Wiki Coffin, a half Maori, half American linguist who is traveling with the 1838 U.S. Exploring Expedition to the Pacific Islands. Her story in this issue, "Brethren of the Sea," features Wiki as a young man.

David Grace, the author of "Piecework," is a lawyer based in the San Francisco Bay area. He has published four novels, including *My Real Name is Lisa* with Carroll and Graf in 1996, and *The Eyes of the Blind* with Wildside Press in 2003; in addition, under the name David Alexander, he has published science fiction stories with our sister magazine, *Analog*. Look for more of the complex interactions between gun dealer Eddie Montefusco and FBI Special Agent Harold Bolger in future issues of AHMM.

Altogether nine great stories await you inside. Enjoy!

# DARK MATTER

---

D. H. REDDALL

**T**he director of the Ocean View Nursing Home wanted to know why I was calling on Roger Quiller.

"Mr. Quiller recently suffered a stroke. Two strokes, actually. Which is why he is a resident here. I'm afraid we cannot risk exposing him to any undue excitement."

Herbert Willoughby, Director, had a voice like oil poured over waxed paper. He was dressed aggressive-casual: navy blazer, white turtleneck, and gray slacks creased so sharply he probably split kindling with them when the hatchet wasn't handy.

"Why would he wish to consult a private investigator?"

"You'd have to ask him," I said. "He didn't tell me."

Willoughby scratched his scalp with a little finger. Picked up the gold pen and tapped it against the leatherbound appointment book with the gilt lettering. Replaced the pen. Stroked the neatly manicured goatee.

"It's just that, in the interest of ensuring the safety and well-being of our clients, we feel it necessary to screen our visitors. You understand."

"Sure," I said. "A procedure like that is no doubt stipulated in Department of Health regulations. Isn't it?"

Willoughby's face froze as the implied threat registered. He pressed a button and a minute later a nurse stuck his head in the door.

"Gregorio, show this gentleman to Mr. Quiller's room."

Gregorio led me to a corner room and disappeared. Roger Quiller was sitting up in bed, reading a newspaper. He looked me up and down.

"You Stubblefield?"

"I am."

"Picked your name out of the phone book." He snorted. "All those wiseguys, angling to be listed first: Ace Investigators, A-One,

A.A.A. I took the last name on the list. Yours."

"That'll teach them," I said. "What did you want to see me about, Mr. Quiller?"

He held up the front page of the paper. "You've heard about this?"

I nodded. By now everyone knew that the Crocker Building had burned to the ground a couple of nights before, despite the efforts of firefighters from four towns to save it.

"Then you know that my brother died in there."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know that. I only heard about a man named Miles Strozier."

"Miles was my half brother. Our mother remarried when I was four. Miles was born a year later. I won't bore you with family history. Suffice it to say that we never considered ourselves half brothers. We were brothers, period."

Quiller took a drink of water from the bedside stand. He used the same hand to adjust the position of his left arm which had been rendered useless by the strokes.

"Miles must have been working late. He went into the law, you know, and I had my own architectural firm until," he gestured vaguely, "until this." He looked out the window at an expanse of lawn bordered by Russian olive and salt spray rose.

A groundskeeper was pushing an old-style mechanical lawnmower, sending up a spray of grass behind. The scene recalled a more pleasant era before two-cycle engines became ubiquitous, smothering us in blather and exhaust. I gave the retro gardener a mental salute, wondering if he had a Philco radio and a rotary phone at home. Or if anyone did.

Quiller brought me back to reality.

"Poor guy. They make him use that contraption because a couple of the old farts here complained about the power mower making too much noise." He adjusted a pillow.

"Now I'd like you to look into this fire. They're saying it was of suspicious origin. In effect, that means someone murdered my brother, and I want that someone brought to justice."

"The cops are on it," I said. "They have many more resources than I do."

"Yes, yes, I know. But sometimes a man, working *sub rosa*, can obtain information the police can't. Now I know Eddie Olivera, and he says you're honest and persistent." He shot me a glance. "He also said you can be a pain in the prat."

Eddie Olivera was a lieutenant on the local police force, and an old friend. That didn't mean I'd be getting any special consideration,



though, and I said as much to Quiller. He shrugged and lay back against the pillows looking drawn and tired.

"Now look. Miles was a good man and a competent lawyer, but from time to time he represented people of, shall we say, questionable character. Maybe one of them wasn't happy when the jury didn't see things Miles's way."

"Alright," I said. "It will cost you seventy-five bucks an hour, plus expenses."

"Money I've got," he replied. "It's time I'm short of."

Willoughby was nowhere to be seen when I left the Ocean View Nursing Home. Neither was the ocean, which was four miles away and visible only to the gulls.

I drove over to Indemnity Insurance on North Street and was ushered into Richard Lem's office. Indemnity insured the Crocker Building against fire, so the case had landed on Lem's desk.

"It's arson, Charles. Not much doubt about that." Lem was a tall, thin number, laconic in speech but with steely gray eyes that suggested a lack of whimsy.

"Accelerant?"

"No trace of an accelerant. No pour pattern. Nothing."

I gave him a puzzled look.

"You've heard of HTA fires? No? Latest thing. Stands for High Temperature Accelerant. You can burn down a warehouse—or in this case an office building—in less than an hour and leave no trace behind." He helped himself to a breath mint.

"The fire looks small at first, but that's deceptive because, at the core, it's actually cooking at three, four thousand degrees Fahrenheit, maybe hotter. So hot that it vaporizes steel and turns concrete into glass. If you spray water on it, it gets worse. The heat will actually break water down at the molecular level so you get oxygen, which feeds the fire, and hydrogen, which explodes. Very dangerous for firefighters, as you can imagine."

"What can do that?"

"Solid rocket fuel. It totally consumes itself, leaving no trace. No proof of arson means we have to pay off according to the terms of the policy. What's your interest here?"

I told him about Quiller's brother.

"That's tough. A classic case of wrong place, wrong time."

"Who owned the building?"

"Felix Swann. Mr. Swann has reportedly suffered some financial setbacks recently. Hell, who hasn't, the way the market's been going."

"You think he burned his own building?"

Lem shrugged. "Very possibly. By the way, I just learned that a second body was found in the wreckage. Probably the janitor, Jackie McShann. Nobody can locate him and he usually worked nights."

After leaving Lem I drove over to Barnstable Road to view the site. The building had housed a furniture outlet, a computer store, and a dry cleaner on the ground floor. Miles Strozier had shared the upper story with several other professional offices. All had been reduced to blackened ruins. Nothing protruded more than a couple of feet above ground level.

The fire marshal's crew was there, along with a black Lab trained to sniff out accelerants. The dog was lying in the sun, eyes at half mast. If Lem was right, there wouldn't be anything for him to do.

Something was bothering me. A professional arsonist will try to avoid human casualties. Yet two people were dead. If Swann was going to burn the place, he could easily have made sure nobody was there. Of course, he might have hired a torch and then gone on a "vacation" so as to have an alibi. The torch might have been less scrupulous about burning people to death.

It took me ten minutes to find a pay phone. The companies are phasing them out in deference to cell phones. It probably won't be long before all land lines meet the same fate as turntables, typewriters, and tapes.

Felix Swann was clearly not pleased with the intrusion, but when I said I was working on Roger Quiller's behalf he gave me directions to his home in Osterville. A maid who was actually wearing a black and white servant's uniform admitted me and led me to a den that overlooked Nantucket Sound. Swann sat in a wheelchair, gazing out at the whitecaps chasing each other across the water. He wheeled around to face me and watched me walk across the room.

"You move like an athlete."

I allowed as I was.

"You wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I hold a black belt in judo and was a competitive weight lifter until an accident put me in this chair." He smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "Was it Randall Jarrell who wrote, 'Pain is worse to the strong, incapacity is worse'?"

"Robinson Jeffers, actually. Will there be a quiz later?"

Swann laughed at that. "Wonderful. A literate detective. I've already submitted to the heavy hands and bad breath of the local constabulary. They obviously believe that I burned down my own building."

"Did you?"

His eyes glinted. "No, I didn't. As I explained to the police, I was recently approached by the Airport Commission. They are planning on expanding the facility and my property is one of several that, were they to buy them, would serve their purposes admirably. Why burn my own building?"

"For the insurance," I said. "Then sell the lot. You collect twice. By the way, did you know another body was found?"

Swann's head snapped around.

"Probably the janitor."

His face registered shock. It looked genuine.

"My God! Bad enough to lose Miles. Now Jackie."

"Who would have reason to burn you out?"

"I have no idea, and I've given it a lot of thought. I have no enemies—at least none who would stand to gain from this."

"But you do have enemies."

"Hell, everybody in business has enemies." The empty smile again. "But as I say, none who would do something like this."

It was after lunchtime, which meant there would be a table at The Rudder. I joined Floyd, the owner, at a corner table and checked out his Halloween decorations, which were pretty pathetic: a few plastic pumpkins and some gauzy material hanging from the overhead lights, with rubber spiders scattered throughout.

"Going all out for Halloween, I see."

Floyd shook his head. "What a dumb holiday. Listen to this, my granddaughter informs me the other day that she requires a pumpkin saw in order to prepare for Halloween. It used to be you got a pumpkin, took a kitchen knife, cut out some triangles. A technique, need I remind you, that has satisfied generations of kids. But no. It seems today one must purchase a packet of patterns for different pumpkin faces. You are then inveighed upon to purchase the special pumpkin saw so that the kids can fashion all these intricate faces that Rodin would have trouble with. But is that all?" He pushed his coffee away in a gesture of disgust. "It is not. My granddaughter goes on to tell me that she must have the *electric* pumpkin saw. You ever heard of an electric pumpkin saw?"

It was a rhetorical question and I let it slide.

"And I'm sure that when you arrive at the store to buy your *electric* pumpkin saw, an overweening young man wearing white socks and an ill-fitting suit will begin trumpeting the merits of the all-new, A-one ippy-pipsy, do-it-yourself custom pumpkincraft carving station, complete with saw, chisels, scrapers, patterns, work-

table, and designer candle—all for a mere forty-nine ninety-nine. No doubt next year they'll be whooping up the fully automated laser pumpkin carver."

He gave me a dour look. "What do you make of it, Charles?"

"It's training wheels for tomorrow's consumers. Someone once pointed out that communism secures its future by capturing the minds of the young. Why should capitalism be any different? Besides, you could use a few handcrafted pumpkins around here. But," I hurried on before he could get indignant, "besides all that, what can you tell me about Miles Strozier?"

"Aw, that was terrible what happened. You working on that?"

I nodded. "You went to school with him, didn't you?"

"I did. We didn't see much of each other after that, but we kept in touch. He'd come in now and then. A nice guy."

"You know any reason someone would want him dead?"

"No. I mean, he defended some bad people, like back in the eighties when they busted those drug smugglers out here, but hell, that's twenty years ago."

"Could be one of them finally got out and decided to fire his lawyer. Permanently."

Floyd shrugged. "Maybe."

"Strozier married?"

"Divorced. Dated some good lookers too."

"Lately?"

"Well, I heard he was seeing a singer who works at The Blue Angel, which is sort of risky."

"Why's that?"

"Word is she's Vincent Toomer's girl."

Floyd was right: it was risky. Toomer was the owner of The Blue Angel and several other clubs, and he had a nasty reputation.

"You ever see her?"

Floyd gave me the look. "I'm in bed by nine, Charles. We don't go nightclubbing. You had a real job, you'd understand."

**J**udging from the clientele at The Blue Angel, class was defined by dark glasses, lots of gold chains, and expensive leather coats. The women wore complicated hairdos and were bedizened with jewelry of all descriptions. The bartender, for some obscure reason, was dressed like a gaucho. Marlene Dietrich looked down from the walls above the leatherette booths with an expression of amused disdain.

I was wearing a tan blazer over a blue shirt, clean dungarees, and

white sneakers. Stubblefield, Master of Assimilation. The bartender looked me over the way a lepidopterist inspects an exotic species.

"Help you?"

"Newcastle Brown Ale."

"No ferjoolie brews here, Ace. Got your domestics plus Beck's, Heineken—"

"Beck's is fine."

I asked if Rita was in. He pointed to a brunette in a blue dress sitting alone looking over some sheet music. I took my beer and walked over.

"Could I have a word with you, Rita?"

"What about?"

"About Miles Strozier."

"What about him?"

"I'm looking into his death. I understand you knew him."

She laid the music down and looked up at me. "You a cop?"

"Private."

She shrugged. "I have a couple of minutes before I go on."

I sat down across from her and plunged right in.

"Word is that you and Miles were an item."

"That a crime?"

"No. Burning people alive is a crime." She bristled at that.

"Vincent had nothing to do with that. When he found out about me and Miles, he went straight to him. That's how Vincent is: up front, man to man."

"You were going with Vincent at the time?"

"No, not exactly. Vincent and I have been sort of off and on, you know. One of the times it was off I saw Miles. Nothing serious, just a few laughs. When Vincent confronted him, Miles said he hadn't known how Vincent felt about me, and said he'd step aside. They shook hands. End of story. That was, what, over a month ago."

"Vincent told you this?"

"Yes, Vincent told me this! So did Miles. He came in the next night, gave me a bouquet, and said goodbye. Vincent was here. We all had champagne, that was that. Look, I'm sorry about what happened to Miles. It's awful. But it has nothing to do with Vincent or me. And that's all I have to say"

She collected her music and walked away. A few minutes later she was playing the piano and singing "Spring Is Here." She had a lovely, breathy delivery that made you forget all about the impending winter and people burning to death in the night.

I called Eddie Oliyera the next morning. He confirmed that the



second body had been identified as that of Jackie McShann. And because he had to, he ordered me not to monkey around in a possible murder investigation. I assured him that it would never occur to me to do such a thing. Halfway through he hung up.

The rest of the day was eaten up by errands and a nap: I wouldn't be getting any sleep that night. I'd been hired to gather evidence of theft involving electronic equipment. It appeared that someone unloading trucks at the main depot was diverting TVs, DVD players, computers, and other electronics to an accomplice. It wasn't a big operation, just a few pieces at a time, but costly enough to justify surveillance.

By eight the following morning my videocam had not been used. Either the thieves had taken a night off, or they were smarter than I.

Tony Sauer was waiting outside my office door. The pug with him was short and wiry, a type that always worries me more than the tall and musclebound. His complexion suggested that he had been bobbing for french fries.

"You strapped?"

"Yeah. The camera is really an Uzi."

The muscle stepped up.

"It's okay, Leo." Leo stopped a few feet away, loose jointed and alert.

"Been a while, Tony"

"Yeah, a while. Reason I'm here, you've taken an interest in Vincent Toomer."

"Just his girlfriend so far."

"That's *too* far."

I put down the camera. "Says who?"

Leo started forward again.

"Tell him to take a step back, Tony. I don't like being crowded so early in the day."

"Leo, go do a spot-check on the Dalmatians, okay?" Leo gave me a long look before heading for the stairs.

"I repeat," said Tony. "You're sticking your nose into Mr. Toomer's business. Why?"

I told him.

"That was a personal matter which was settled. Peacefully. Besides, arson is a criminal activity. Mr. Toomer is a legitimate businessman."

"Sure he is. Didn't I hear that he beat a guy to death in Chicago a few years ago over a gambling debt?"

"I wouldn't know. Besides, you know how people are: they love rumors. I was you, I wouldn't repeat that one." He buttoned his

coat. "Besides, killing lawyers isn't smart. Not even Leo would croak a lawyer." He grinned. "I don't know what his policy is on peepers."

"You used to do honest work, Tony. What happened?"

The smile died. "You're an honest guy. What kind of car you driving?" He wasn't angry, just tired, as if he'd had this conversation many times. "I discovered something. I like silk. I don't like denim. I walk onto a car lot, buy any model I want. Cash. Twenty years from now, you'll still be driving some rusty piece of crap and chasing chump change looking in motel windows."

"And you'll still be carrying Toomer's hat for him, unless you're swabbing the floors in Walpole."

Tony just shook his head. "You've been told. Butt out of Mr. Toomer's business. Keep it up, Leo will be coming to see you. Only thing is, I don't think you'll see him."

I've always had a special loathing for those ghouls in the media who shove a microphone at a mother whose kid was just mowed down by a drunk driver and ask, piously, "How do you feel right now, Mrs. Jones?" Yet the next day I was facing Jackie McShann's widow, Florence. She was hollow eyed and depleted and I wished I hadn't come, but I needed to explore any possible avenue.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Mrs. McShann. I'll be brief." She nodded and led me to a tiny kitchen where she poured some coffee, sat down across from me, and waited.

"I'm looking for anything that might shed some light on the fire. I need to know if your husband ever saw or heard anything unusual."

"Unusual like what?" She had a beautiful lilting voice that sounded Jamaican to my untutored ear.

"Well, did Jackie witness anyone having an argument with Miles Strozier, or did Strozier give any indication that he was afraid of something?"

"No. I told the police, nothing like that." A calico cat jumped up into her lap and peered at me across the tabletop. "He never say anything about any kind of trouble."

"Did your husband have any enemies?"

Her eyes rounded. "Jackie? No, no enemies. We are quiet people. No trouble. No enemies." She stroked the cat mechanically and rocked gently back and forth.

"Thank you, Mrs. McShann." I got up to go.

"You would think," she said, "I would be used to funerals. Been to several this year. Jackie lost two friends, you know. Both accidents, they say."

I waited. The cat's eyes never left mine.

"Fred Bishop, he took a drink and fell down some stairs. That was in February. Tully Noones, now, Tully he got blown up in July. Something about a gas leak in the stove or some such." She rocked some more. "Sort of funny, don't you think?"

I did think.

"How long did your husband know them?"

She thought. "Oh, I guess five, six years. Since they all worked together at Crown Corporation. You know, for Mr. Toomer."

I left Florence McShann's house bearing two questions. One, if Toomer and Strozier had settled their problem amicably, why had Toomer sent Tony around to see me? Presumably, he had nothing to hide. Two, was it just a coincidence that three men who had once worked for Toomer all died within a few months of each other?

I called Richard Lem and told him about Bishop and Noones. There was a long pause before he said he had an idea and that I should come by the office the next day.

Midnight found me back at the truck depot. Instead of watching from the car, I took a position among the oaks lining the west side of the lot. From there I had a better view of all the loading docks. It was warm for October. I unzipped my jacket and opened the thermos of coffee.

Surveillance is skullflattening work, boring beyond description. I found myself replaying the conversation with Tony Sauer. At the time his words had stung. After all, he was probably right: I had pretty well determined my future by the opportunities I'd ignored. And that was okay. I'd seen what the single-minded pursuit of money did to people, and while I hadn't taken vows of poverty, I didn't want any part of that life. Making lots of money, it seems to me, is a small thing. Anyone with a certain amount of animal cunning can do it. All that's required is a willingness to subjugate all other interests to the one thing, to do whatever it takes, no matter how distasteful. Like defending mobsters, swindling investors, building strip malls, or holding doors for Vincent Toomer.

Tony was right. I didn't see Leo coming. But shortly before dawn I heard him. The sound of a twig snapping behind me gave me just enough time to flatten out before three bullets tore bark from the tree a few inches above my head. Normally I don't carry a gun, but Tony Sauer is a man of few words, and he means every one of them. So I had put on the shoulder rig and the Browning 9mm, and now I was damn glad I had.

The truck detail paused and looked our way, uncertain as to what was happening. Another shot went wide and punctured a

semi. That sent the workers scurrying for cover. It also meant that Leo had to hurry: the cops would be here in a few minutes.

I scrambled around to the far side of the tree and when Leo fired again I sent three rounds at the muzzle blast, then bracketed the spot with four more. Through the ringing in my ears I heard Leo running through the underbrush and a minute later the sound of a car taking off. I headed for my own car on a run, not wanting to try and explain a gunfight to the police.

Richard Lem was talking.

"Here it is, Charles, and it stinks out loud. Bishop, Noones, and McShann at one time all worked for Toomer. Bishop was his driver and gopher. Noones was an all-round guy: carpentry, plumbing, general maintenance. McShann did the janitorial work in Toomer's nightclubs. They worked for Toomer for awhile, then moved on. Now, it was a long shot, but it paid off: I've been able to establish that Toomer took out life insurance policies on each of them. Rather large policies."

"Are the policies legal?"

He nodded. "They're known as COLIs: corporate-owned life insurance. They're also known by the somewhat unfortunate name of "dead janitor policies." You can be pretty sure that Toomer never told those guys about the existence of the policies."

"Is that legal?"

"It is. There was a case out West recently where a convenience store clerk died in an accident. The store, which was part of a chain, had taken out a COLI policy on him. They collected a hundred thousand."

"Is this a common practice?"

"Fairly common." He glanced at the file. "Your three guys were each insured for a quarter million. And here's the key point: even after they left Toomer's employ their policies remained in effect, with Toomer as beneficiary, as long as he kept up the payments." He leaned back and closed the file. "It would seem that Mr. Toomer was planning ahead for his retirement."

"Yeah. Maybe he opted for early retirement."

"Looks like it to me. Good luck proving it, though."

"There's no end to the dry rot, is there? Whether it's Enron or a cockroach like Toomer: look a little deeper, there it is."

Lem reached for a breath mint. "Astronomers talk about something they call dark matter. According to them, what we can see comprises only about ten percent of what's out there. The rest is invisible: dark matter. Can't see it, but they know it's there

because it influences everything else in the universe, the stuff we can see." He tapped the file jacket. "A pretty metaphor for life as we know it, wouldn't you say?"

His phone rang and I headed for the street. My car was parked in the lot behind Indemnity. It was shaping up to be a nice day. No one else was in the lot; the poor souls were all probably moving papers from the IN box to the OUT box. Gulls were soaring high in a porcelain sky, apparently just reveling in the joy of flying. The aroma of coffee and fresh bread permeated the air. It was not the time of day when one would anticipate trouble.

Leo emerged from the alley between Indemnity and the Fuller Building, about thirty yards away. He didn't hesitate, just pulled out an automatic and strode toward me, firing as he came.

He was a little too far away for good accuracy. A windshield behind me imploded and something tugged briefly at my arm. I was out in the open in a driving lane and there was no time for anything but to pull out the Browning and return fire. I turned sideways to reduce the target area and the gun jumped in my hand. I kept pulling the trigger until Leo stopped, a puzzled expression on his face, as if to say, "What'd you do that for?" Then he crumpled to the pavement.

I stood for a moment, badly shaken. Faces appeared at the windows of several buildings and I saw cell phones being activated. There was, I realized, blood trickling down my left arm. The whole thing had been too sudden and too close for comfort. There would be cops soon. I got to my car, not wanting to talk to them just yet.

The Blue Angel was not open for business at that hour, but the front door was open. A cleaning person was vacuuming by the bar, his back to me. A hallway to the right led to a door marked "Private." Voices were audible on the other side. I freed up the Browning and went through.

Toomer was seated at his desk. He had a narrow, bony face and black hair slicked straight back. Tony Sauer stood by a window. When he saw me he extended his arms well away from his body.

"Good work, old buddy," said Tony. "Trespassing, assault with a deadly weapon—"

"Shut up, Tony." I turned to Toomer, who was glaring at me.

"Who the hell you think you are?" he said.

"I hope you had a COLI on Leo," I said. "You'll need the money for your lawyers."

"Leo who?" he said, smirking.

"I don't like being threatened, Toomer, and I really don't like



being shot at by some head case. What's the matter? Your girlfriend says you're an up-front guy." I looked him up and down with contempt. "You look like a wimpsuck to me."

He got up and came around the desk in a raw, red-eyed rage. "You pathetic son of a bitch. I'll have you tagged before the week is out."

"Leo already tried that. He's stretched out on a slab with a tag on his toe. You're not only gutless, you're stupid as well."

He was either very brave or very dumb, or maybe he just figured I wouldn't shoot an unarmed man. He charged and threw a straight right at my head. I slipped the punch and drove the muzzle of the Browning into his solar plexus. He folded up with a grunt, fighting for air, and I slapped him across the jaw with the gun barrel hard enough to knock him to the floor.

"You're begging trouble," said Tony, shaking his head.

I put the gun away and faced him. "Okay. Let's have trouble then." I was hot now and didn't really care what happened next. Tony sensed it.

"Another time," he said.

"No other time, Tony, because I swear the next time I see you or Toomer someone's going down for the count." I nodded toward Toomer. "He's all done. Sending Leo after me is one thing. Three murders is another. You got any brains, you'll clear out, find another line of work."

I left him to tend to his boss and drove to police headquarters to face the music.

**E**ddie Olivera was not happy.

"Goddamit, Charles, I told you to stay clear of this."

"He tried to have me put to sleep, Eddie."

"I don't care. This isn't Tombstone, 1881. You're over the line this time."

"You talk to Lem?"

"What the hell you think we do over here, hang around the squad room playing Yahtzee? Yeah, I talked to Lem. Dead janitors. Okay, that's one for you. Meantime, while you're shooting up the town and assaulting a citizen in his place of business, we're building a case. We got a lead on the rocket fuel. Cops down in Brighton Beach have been keeping an eye on some Russians who are moving weapons. Tony Sauer was seen talking with them recently." He sighed. "Look, the dead janitor thing is going to help. A lot. But Toomer's playing the victim to the hilt, screaming bloody murder

about harrassment, his civil rights, and I don't know what else. I got no choice here but to send this over to the State, and you know what that means: possible revocation of your license. My advice is to get yourself a good lawyer."

Roger Quiller looked like he had aged several years since I had seen him last.

"They say something's wrong with my liver. *Stressed* is the word they used." A pair of nurses smiled at me on their way out.

"Pray you never end up in one of these places," he said when they'd gone. "You're not perceived as a human being in here. They move you around like you're lumber, all the time talking to each other about the most intimate things, as if I wasn't even here. And the food?" He waved his good hand. "You ever heard of a turkey pot roast? Christ! And you could break a denture on the raw carrots. Where do they train these chefs, at San Quentin? The nurses like me because I'm one of the only inmates in this joint who isn't soiling his pajamas and holding conversations with his dead brother."

When he finished complaining I filled him in on what had happened.

"So, will they nail him or not?"

I shrugged. "Hard to say. They're still developing their case."

"How about you?"

"Well, there were a couple of witnesses who saw Leo initiate the attack on me, so I'll be alright on that count. I don't know about the rest."

"Never mind. You did good. You did real good."

I wasn't so sure about that.

I left the nursing home and drove to Eastham where I took a walk out on Coast Guard Beach. The gannets were diving for dinner, hitting the water like black and white spears. A seal surfaced, checked me out for a minute, then dove under again. Due east lay open ocean with no place to land until the Azores.

Thoreau visited Cape Cod and walked these beaches. A man, he said, could stand here and put all of America behind him. Which was precisely what I felt like doing. Trouble is, America has a way of reaching out and shaking you by the shoulder.

I walked some more and watched the gannets flashing in the afternoon sunlight and I envied their freedom, their self-sufficiency, the simplicity of their lives. After awhile, I turned and headed back. 🐦

# BRETHREN OF THE SEA

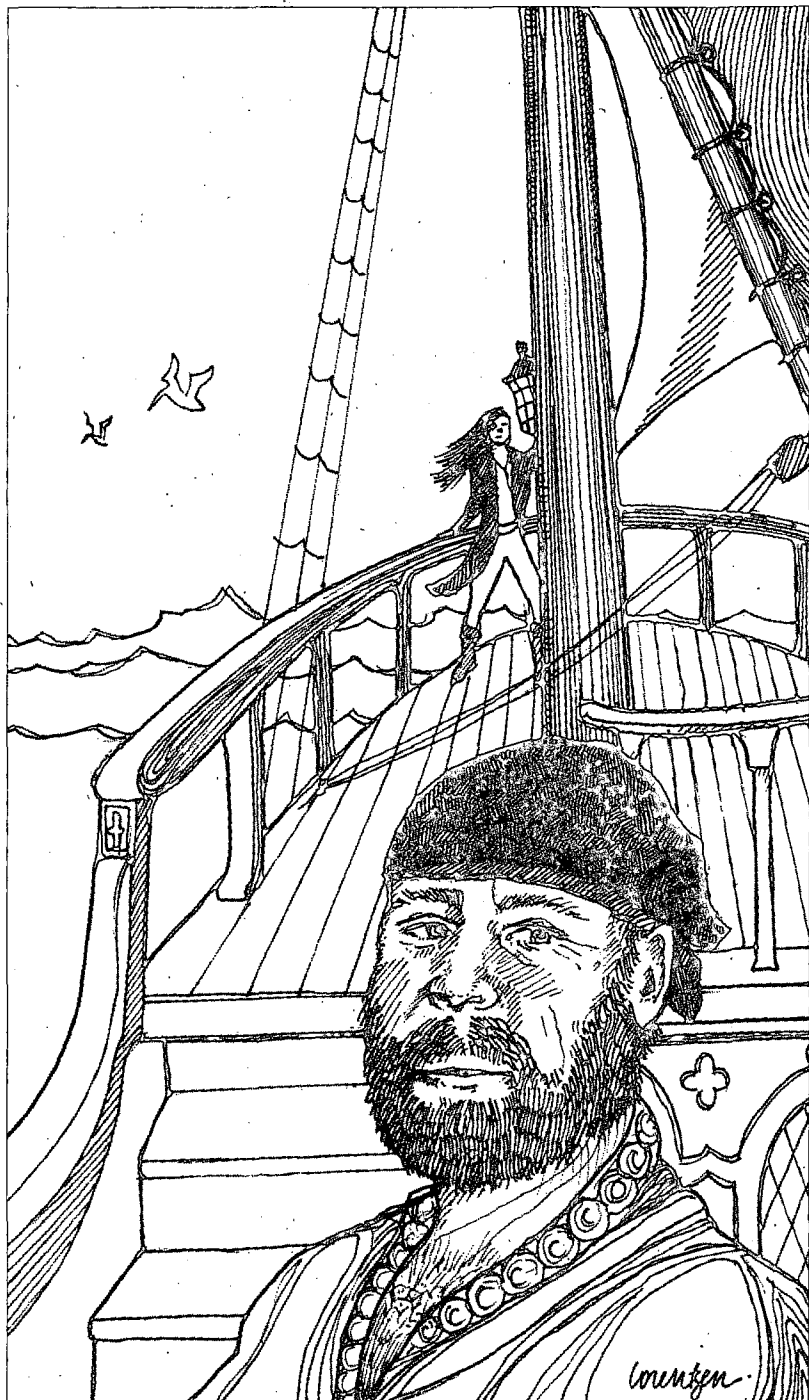
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JOAN DRUETT

**I**t was a raw April morning in Nantucket, a chill wind whisking down Main Street to the sea, carrying with it just about all the gritty damp sand that was not pinned down by cobblestones or the square, solid, gray-colored buildings that seemed to hunch down to the ground. The lowering sky promised worse to come, but nonetheless the mate and the third mate of the whaleship *Paths of Duty* were leaning at their ease on the larboard rail as they watched the townspeople scurry about holding their hats and bonnets, and waited for the crew to straggle up the wharf to the gangway plank. The ship was supposed to sail on the evening tide, but only the cook and the cooper had turned up so far, along with the captain, who was poorly in his cabin. However, neither of them betrayed concern. Instead, they companionably chatted.

The first and third mates were brothers, but had shipped under different surnames to avoid confusion. The first mate had kept the family name, Smith, while the younger man had adopted their mother's maiden name, Starbuck, for the voyage. Though they were brothers, they did not know each other very well. Not only were there seven years between them, but both had been whaling since the age of fourteen, so that whenever one was at home, the other was most likely not. However, the few times they had met, they had been comfortable in each other's company, and now they were glad—as well as amazed—to be on the same ship.

"Who the hell is that?" said Third Mate Starbuck, and jerked his chin at a young, well-built lad who was striding up the gangplank on the breast of a gust, the tails of his black coat bellying out before him. A plain, unvarnished sea chest was set on one broad shoulder, so new that there were saw marks in the wood. Snaky



locks of long black hair streamed out from under a wide-brimmed leather hat, so Starbuck assumed that he was Indian. When the young fellow tipped back the broad hat as he arrived on deck, though, his nose was flat instead of hawk—a Kanaka, the third mate thought with surprise. It was common in the Pacific to recruit islanders as crew, but few of them came back to New England, and he had never heard of a Pacific Islands native joining a ship in Nantucket. Then, with a small jolt of shock, he saw that the narrowed eyes were glinting blue.

The stranger said, "*Paths of Duty?*"

The third mate's brother stirred. "You say *sir* when you speak to an officer, boy."

"Sorry, *sir*."

An independent Kanaka, the third mate mused, noting the slight snap in the second word, and meditated further that it might not be long before the native learned to regret it.

The first mate said, "You signed Articles yet, son?" When the laddie shook his head, he said, "Down in the cabin with you, then," and jerked his head toward the companionway. "If Captain Gardiner ain't at the table, just knock on his door."

The third mate, watching the Kanaka lope off aft as if he knew exactly where he was going, said, "What the devil?"

"Devil indeed," said his brother, and grunted with amusement. "Don't you know him?"

"Never saw or heard of him," Third Mate Starbuck replied. He had returned to Nantucket from a four-year voyage just a couple of weeks before, and would have stayed at home longer if the chance to ship with his brother had not come up, and so he was yet to learn a lot of local gossip.

"Well, brace yourself for a surprise, Jed—he's the son of Captain Gardiner's brother-in-law. The captain's shipping the lad at his sister Huldah's request."

The third mate, who remembered Huldah Gardiner from his childhood days, said blankly, "I didn't know she had children."

"She doesn't—and certainly not brown ones," Mr. Smith said, and snickered again. "Her husband fathered the boy in New Zealand, carried him home without warning, and left him behind when he sailed off on his next voyage to the Orient—to keep Huldah company while he was away, he said! Naturally, she wishes the lad back in the Pacific where he rightfully belongs. And, being her brother, Captain Gardiner is happy to oblige."

Huldah Gardiner's husband was from Salem, Massachusetts, the third mate remembered. Salem folks gossiped just like Nantucket



people—and bringing a bastard son back from the Pacific would have surely set the tongues to rattling. And fancy even thinking of leaving the boy at home! Jed Starbuck shook his head in wonder that any man, even a Salem shipmaster who dealt with foreign folks as part of his trade, could be so thickheaded. Company for a decent Nantucket-educated woman? Hell, he thought—the half-breed probably didn't even speak much more than a few labored English phrases, and most surely could not read and write.

He had learned to write his name, though. When Jed went below to witness the ship's papers, the lad's signature was clear: "William Coffin, junior." According to the knowledgeable first mate, however, everyone called him Wiki.

The whaleship, as scheduled, sailed on the evening tide, but did not go far, dropping anchor next day off Edgartown, alongside a local whaler that was on the verge of setting out on voyage. The bar at the mouth of Nantucket harbor had become so silted up that it was unsafe for even the small, elderly *Paths of Duty* to get out fully loaded, and so she would complete her provisioning and take on the rest of her crew here. This last included the second mate, Peter Holden, who turned out to be the most sorry-looking fellow the third mate had clapped eyes upon in many a long year. He might have been handsome enough, but his every aspect was dark and gloomy, and he cast many a mournful look back over his shoulder as he came up the gangway.

"I thought he was due for a command," Jed Starbuck observed to First Mate Smith, after Holden had gone below to sign Articles. He did not bother to lower his voice, because the only man in ear-shot was the half-breed Kanaka, who had been set to work overhauling whalelines. "Wasn't Peter Holden the first mate of the *Loper*?" he asked.

The *Loper* had come in ten months before with a record cargo, which meant that all her officers, being considered lucky and competent, were in line for promotion. However, instead of looking for a command of his own, Holden had stopped on shore to enjoy his considerable earnings from the voyage at leisure. Yet, as the third mate went on to muse aloud, he was now leaving in what looked like a hell of a hurry, particularly considering that he had accepted the lowly position of second officer to do so.

"He's got good reason to disappear fast," said Mr. Smith with a snigger. Captain Hemington of the *Penguin* had just got home from a three-year Pacific and Indian Ocean voyage, all eagerness to reclaim his young wife, who was as pretty and lively as a basketful

of kittens. Well, as First Mate Smith went on to say, for the first couple of years of her grass-widowhood, Mrs. Hemington's reputation had been perfectly unsullied. But then Peter Holden had arrived home, flush with money from the *Loper*—"and he and young Mrs. Hemington did a hell of a lot more together than sing duets at church suppers."

Wiki Coffin listened to all this with a carefully blank expression, keeping his head down to hide his distaste as he neatly coiled rope into a line-tub. He didn't even believe the slander. Over the past five years, since the day he and his father, Captain William Coffin, had arrived in New England, he had learned to distrust gossip, being the target of so much of it himself. And, anyway, judging by the way the first mate described Mrs. Hemington—a basketful of kittens, for God's sake!—Mr. Smith had fancied her more than a little himself. Having met with no success in his own assault on her virtue, he was getting a little cheap revenge—or so Wiki deduced.

In the late afternoon, however, when the new second mate asked him to run a message, he began to wonder whether he was wrong. Wiki was up in the maintop reeving some rigging when he heard his name called quietly, and when he arrived at the bottom of the mast he scrutinized Mr. Holden curiously, noting the dark, haunted eyes, and the way the skin was drawn tautly over his handsome cheekbones.

The second mate looked around to make sure they were unobserved, and then said, "Do you understand any English at all?"

"A little," Wiki said dryly.

"I want you to carry a letter for me—to a house on that street up there to the left of Main Street, the one exactly opposite to the church. The house is one lot away from the corner, and it has the number thirty-eight on the edge of the stoop. I guess you can't read, but you'll easily recognize it because it is the only house with a blue door. Do you understand the word *blue*? Excellent! But make sure you give the letter to the lady—and no one else."

Wiki half expected to be detained as he set off down the gangway, but Holden had chosen the moment well, he saw, because there was no one around to pay him any attention. Once he was out of sight of the ship, he slowed to a dawdle, enjoying the early evening air and the chance to look around Edgartown. He liked the square white towers and the dainty spires and the neat white and shingled houses, each set in its own lot and surrounded by a picket fence—prettier than Salem, and more homelike than Nantucket, he thought. When he arrived at number thirty-eight, the blue door was ajar, and he hesitated, because a man was shout-

ing inside, his incoherent anger interrupted at intervals by the murmuring of a woman's voice.

As he knocked, he wondered what he would do if the man answered. However, it was the woman who came. She was young, only a few years older than Wiki himself, and extremely beautiful, he thought. He might be only seventeen, and, because of his inheritance from his mother, he only rarely needed to shave, but like most Maori men he had matured early, and since then he had developed a deep appreciation of women and their beauty. Mrs. Hemington was particularly pretty, having huge, swimming blue eyes and shiny yellow ringlets spilling out of the confines of her cap. Then, with a frown, he noted the marks on her arm and the darkening bruise on one cheek.

When her eyes focused on Wiki's brown face her mouth fell open with surprise, and he hastily put a finger to his own lips to keep her silent as he handed her the letter. The man's harsh voice called out from inside the house, his steps coming nearer. She grabbed the letter, put it into her bosom, whirled around, and slammed the door in Wiki's face.

As he was retracing his steps along Main Street, he was overtaken by a hurried rattle of wheels. Dust whirled, and a buggy galloped past, driven by a stout man in a top hat who was hunched over the reins as if to make the horse go faster. Then the rattle changed to a rumble as the carriage disappeared along the wharf. When Wiki arrived at the gangplank the buggy was standing there empty, and on board there was a distinct sense of panic and emergency. The seamen were all on deck, milling about. The doctor had been called for Captain Gardiner, Wiki gathered—and then, with a shock, as the doctor came up the companionway, talking loudly to the ship's agent and the first officer, Mr. Smith, he learned that the captain was dead.

The entry in the logbook of the *Paths of Duty* read, "Commences with strong breezes, at 2 P.M. dropped anchor at Edgartown, at 6 P.M. Capt. G. A. Gardiner died after a short illness of a few hours," and was decorated with a drawing of a coffin. First Mate Smith, who wrote this, was anxious to accept the captain's death as a natural blow from fate. Everyone knew that Captain Gardiner had been poorly when the ship had left Nantucket. However, the doctor was inclined to be difficult. "I'd like an investigation, and would demand one if there was anyone here with any kind of motive for wanting Captain Gardiner dead," he loudly said to the ship's agent, "because it ain't natural for a man to go so fast and with such sudden symptoms."

Wiki wondered uneasily if the finger was going to be pointed at him—while he had only met Captain Gardiner a couple of times, and that only briefly, he was the bastard half-breed son of the captain's brother-in-law, which counted as a crime already. However, no one even glanced in his direction. The ship's agent—an influential man, being a magistrate and the owner of a substantial

## **T**rouble arrived with a vengeance . . .

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chandlery business in addition to representing the Nantucket owners—was only worried about finding another master, so that the ship could set out on her voyage instead of wast-

ing money by lying here at anchor. After all, as the physician himself had said, there was no one who benefited from Captain Gardiner's death: he had never married, never had any children, and had never saved his money.

However, the death was certainly mysterious, and, as Wiki meditated, if the island of Martha's Vineyard had not been as preoccupied with the whaling business as the island of Nantucket, the ship would have definitely been delayed for further queries. As it was, another captain was hired within forty-eight hours. And, to everyone's dismay—and to the undoubted horror of Second Mate Peter Holden—the replacement was Captain Hemington.

Hemington had fully justified his reputation as a hard master within days of leaving Buzzards Bay, and by the time the ship dropped anchor at Fayal, in the Azores—where all the Yankee whalers stocked up with fresh fruit and vegetables for the passage about Cape Horn—the seamen were so unhappy that six jumped the ship the first chance they got. Four were recaptured, but two had to be replaced, which did not improve the captain's temper in the slightest.

The Edgartown whaler that had left Martha's Vineyard the day after Captain Gardiner died was also lying off Fayal, but despite Hemington's persuasions and promises, the captain refused to let him have two of his men. In the end, Captain Hemington had to pay the American consul to find two sailors who could be talked into signing the ship's Articles. Then, all that worthy could locate was a couple of rogues who were probably not even going under their rightful names. The one who called himself Francisco da Silva looked particularly villainous, with brooding dark eyes that darted about above prominent cheekbones.

It did not take long at all for the whole ship to become aware

that Francisco meant trouble. The day after sailing from Fayal, Captain Hemington ordered that the four deserters who had been recaptured should be seized up in the rigging as a punishment for running away. They were tied by their thumbs, so high that their feet barely brushed the deck. The first time the ship rolled they cried out with pain as their thumbs took their whole weight, and Francisco shouted out something in Portuguese. He subsided when First Mate Smith threatened to tie him up alongside them, but his expression was so murderous that Wiki had a strong feeling that worse was to come before many more weeks of the voyage had passed.

As it happened, he was wrong. Trouble arrived with a vengeance the very next day.

It was a bright, warm afternoon with a fine topgallant breeze, and the *Paths of Duty* was forging along quietly under easy sail, looking for whales. The sea heaved and shimmered, and forty miles off, the peak of Flores, one of the Azores, made a blue smudge on the horizon. Wiki was one of the lookouts, perched up the top of the foremast, and his sharp eyes were the first to sight the school. He kept quiet for some moments, enjoying the distant sight of spouting and splashing, and might not have called out at all because he had found that he did not like the whaling business in the slightest. However, the decision was taken away from him, because the other lookout, the man at the head of the mainmast, glimpsed them and hollered.

All four boats were lowered, their sails were set, and they sailed stealthily toward the whales, which were still playing about, unaware of danger. Wiki, who was midship oarsman in the second mate's boat, saw the other boats appear and disappear as they lifted over the crests of the waves, looking for all the world like moths half lost in the sparkle of the sea and sky. Then all at once there was a commotion in the first mate's boat. Only one man should have been standing—First Mate Smith, holding the steering oar at the stern of the boat and peering forward for the first glimpse of the whales—but someone else had risen to his feet. Wiki heard shouts, and then saw Mr. Smith lurch back. There was a short, noisy struggle, and the mate fell down into the bottom of the boat. Then there was a muddle of noise and movement as the boat's crew all fell on the man who had hit Mr. Smith and overwhelmed him.

With an arch and flick of great flukes, the whales slid out of sight, heading for the depths of the sea, having been alerted by the shouts and commotion. First Mate Smith, now back on his

feet but with a bloodied face, signaled to all the boats to return to the ship, where Captain Hemington was waiting in a towering rage, the crime of gallying—frightening off—the whales being an even more heinous one than attacking the ship's first officer.

The second mate's boat was the last to arrive, and there was already a great deal of shouting going on by the time they reached the boat falls that were dangling from the davits. The other three boats had all been hoisted up, but the sounds from the deck were so urgent that Holden ordered his men to secure the boat to the dangling rope and leave it floating. Then he, with four of the oarsmen, scrambled hastily up the ship's side, leaving the second man who had been shipped in Fayal to look after the boat.

When Wiki arrived on deck Francisco, grappled by both the third and first mates, was struggling like a madman, while Captain Hemington hovered close, a doubled rope in his fist which he laid on Francisco's back every time he had a chance. Holden sprinted forward to bear a hand, but before he even got a hold on Francisco, Mr. Smith was hurled out of the fracas by sheer enraged force, to land full-length on the deck, his head cracking audibly on the rail as he fell. The third mate let out a shout of alarm and fear, and slacked his hold a moment. Francisco broke loose, grappled Holden, tore a long knife out of the second mate's belt, and plunged it into the captain's chest. Then, with equally shocking abruptness, he jumped over the side and into the sea.

It had happened so fast that for three heartbeats everyone stood frozen. The ghastly rattle of Captain Hemington's last breath echoed in the awful silence. Then Wiki heard a splash. When he looked over the rail, Francisco was clambering into the floating boat, and the man who had been left in charge of it was using an oar to push it away from the ship. Wiki heard running footsteps; he whipped around and saw that the second mate was on the verge of jumping over the rail. To all appearances, Holden was simply trying to stop the two men from sailing off with the boat, but without hesitation Wiki threw himself forward in a tackle.

Both men crashed to the deck, Wiki on top. He unclasped the jackknife he had in his own belt, and then hauled Holden upright, the open knife at his throat. When he looked down at the water Francisco was standing in the boat, staring up at him, his stance rigid, the skin over his high cheekbones slowly going white.

Wiki said very clearly, "Get back onto this deck or your brother gets hurt."

"No, Frank, no!" shouted Holden, but his brother, slumped and diminished by defeat, climbed up the side of the ship.





"But how did you guess?" asked the third mate, Jed Starbuck. His eyes kept on sliding away from Wiki's face and then back again, as if he did not believe what he saw. The three prisoners were in the hold, shackled in irons; First Mate Smith was lying on the settee in the captain's cabin while he got over his concussion; and Starbuck and Wiki were in the saloon cabin where the officers of the ship normally ate.

Wiki wondered wryly what it was that Mr. Starbuck found hardest to believe—that an ignorant half-breed lad had so competently taken control of the situation, or that a Pacific Islands native had the brains to speak and understand American English.

He said, "It all began with the death of Captain Gardiner and the surgeon's suspicion that he could have been poisoned. The doctor gave up when he learned that there was no apparent motive for murder, but I kept on wondering about it, thinking about a saying that our people have: *Ko nga take whawhai, he whenua, he wahine*—for the causes of trouble, look at land, look at women. And Captain Gardiner had not much at all in the way of land and fortune."

"But there was no woman in his life—he wasn't married! The petticoats didn't interest him!"

"That was indeed a stumbling block," Wiki agreed. "But I thought about a woman who was causing trouble already—Mrs. Hemington, the lover of Mr. Holden, who had just come on board as second mate. I wondered if it was at all possible that Captain Gardiner had been killed so that the command would be passed on to Captain Hemington. I knew already, you see, that Captain Hemington beat his wife. Maybe, I thought, Mr. Holden held fears for her safety."

"You expect me to believe he killed Captain Gardiner to get Captain Hemington out of Edgartown, just because he beat his missus?" the third mate asked. He was beginning to get his wits back, and so his tone was distinctly derisive.

"Mr. Holden struck me as a very passionate man," Wiki pointed out quietly. "And there was also the matter of a letter," he went on. "Just a few hours after Holden arrived on board, he asked me to carry a letter to Mrs. Hemington, which seemed a foolhardy gesture, as it could easily have fallen into Captain Hemington's hands. So, it seemed to me that it had to be important enough to warrant the danger. Perhaps it was not a letter for her, but a message for her to pass on—something which I wondered about when I noticed that the same Edgartown whaler that had left Martha's


Vineyard the day after Captain Gardiner died was lying off the island of Fayal when we arrived. When Francisco joined the ship, the idea that that letter had been sent out on that ship began to make a lot of sense. If it was indeed for him, then it probably just asked him to join the *Paths of Duty*, and perhaps also to bring a friend to help sail the boat. Once Francisco was on board, he and Mr. Holden would have had plenty of time to plot Hemington's murder. It had to happen while we were still close enough to the Azores for the boat to sail there, but otherwise it was just a case of seizing the first good opportunity."

It had all depended on no one suspecting any link between Peter Holden and his brother Frank, who had called himself Francisco. It could have worked so easily—but because he was there they both would pay the penalty for murder. Wiki remembered Mrs. Hemington's big blue eyes and pretty curls, and hoped she would have the sense not to choose a whaleman when she remarried.

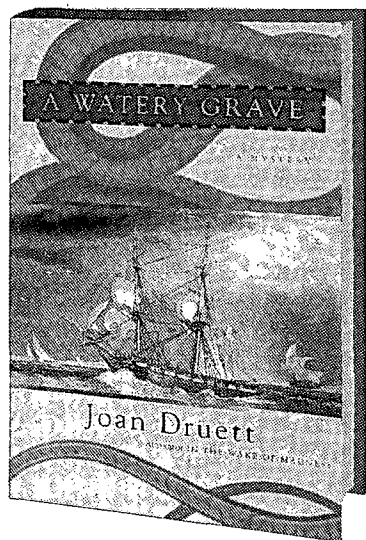
"Jesus," Mr. Starbuck was saying softly. He shook his head, very obviously having trouble coming to grips with what had happened. The ship was heading back to Fayal to hand the prisoners over to the law, but it was very apparent that it was Wiki who would have to do all the explaining to the United States consul.

"But how the devil do you know they were brothers?" he burst out. "Hell, Peter Holden was an officer, and Francisco was just a rough and ragged Fayal Portuguese—they don't even *look* alike!"

"Don't they?" said Wiki, and smiled. In the Pacific cultures he knew, nakedness was so common and dress so scanty that people distinguished each other by stature, bone structure, stance, and movement, not by what they wore or the kind of speech they assumed—but it was hopeless, he decided, to try to explain that to a Nantucketer. So, instead of answering, he enquired gently, "Sir, do you think that *your* brother will be well enough soon to take over the command of the ship?"



Mysterious meetings and readerly rendezvous are available in The Readers Forum at [www.TheMysteryPlace.com](http://www.TheMysteryPlace.com).



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## THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

U BTNO JTUG OZAMDB KA EAZNUZEO RAM KBTK  
EUCBOIJ AL KBUJ ZTKMIO TIO IOTGUXR JAXMHXO, TZG  
DUNO RAM JAYO UZJUDBK UZKA KBO ITKUAZTXO AL KBOUI  
GONOXACYOZK.

—OGDTI TXXTZ CAO

CIPHER: \_\_\_\_\_

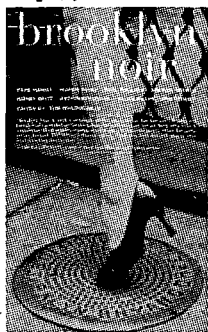
ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z .

*Solution on page 125*

# BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

**T**here are orthodox Jews, Jamaican posses, Bohemians, crooked cops, jaded bureaucrats, hookers, addicts, businessmen, people rich in many ways or poor beyond belief. There are warehouses, wharves, rehabbed neighborhoods, slums, elegant apartments, and shells. And enough stories to fill a slew of recent books that readers might wonder how they can all be about the same place.



The place is the quintessentially American borough of Brooklyn.

**BROOKLYN NOIR** (Akashic Books, \$15.95) lives up to its title. Editor Tim McLoughlin has selected stories that truly deserve the term *noir*, which is unusual now that “noir” seems to be used for everything that isn’t a cozy. But these bleak, violent, desperate stories reek of the real whether they are dealing with Coney Island or Brighton Beach, Bedford-Stuyvesant or Red Hook.

McLoughlin appears to have chosen stories based on location and merit rather than on mere name recognition, and the lineup, aside from Pete Hamill and Ken Bruen, may be unfamiliar to most readers. Hamill leads the collection with “The Book Signing,” a story that deals with a successful author’s long overdue return to the old neighborhood he’d left as a young man and a confrontation with his past. McLoughlin describes Bruen’s contribution, “Fade to Brooklyn,” as “our virtual Brooklyn story.” Although it takes place in the author’s native Ireland, its heart is pure Flatbush. Ellen Miller’s “Practicing” is a harrowing story of a young girl whose father is a bridgeman. Miller brings to life the “burly, balletic” men and boys who daily risked their lives on the area’s many bridges; the odd bond forged between father and daughter transforms this unforgettable story. Norman Kelley’s “The Code” riffs on a street tough rapper determined to make it bigger and badder than anyone. No polished edges to this jagged, effective rap story that shows the fall down can be harder than the road up. Lou Manfredi’s “Case Closed” is textbook perfect on the schooling of a rookie detective by his veteran partner. When the two catch a rape attempt call in Bensonhurst, the rookie cop really wants to catch the perp while his partner is inclined to dismiss it. When the old pro goes to work as a favor, the rookie discovers payback can be dear. Luciano Guerriero’s story “Eating Italian” is set in Red Hook and also

tells the story of two cops, veterans who have succeeded in cleaning up the waterfront territory they patrol while remaining clean themselves. But even good cops can make bad decisions as Guerriero ingeniously demonstrates. Maggie Estep seems to have invented her own sub-genre, horse-noir, with her Ruby Murphy novels (*Gargantuan*, Three Rivers Press). Like her series, her contribution "Triple Harrison" features another horse-lover and an odd collection of stables in East New York. Estep's writings show great originality as her offbeat characters hew marginal livings around the animals they love.

There are more in this stellar collection, including C. J. Sullivan's heartbreaking "Slipping into Darkness" and Pearl Abraham's "Hasidic Noir" where an orthodox P.I. uses unorthodox measures to right a wrong. Rounding out the collection are stories by Sidney Offit, Tim McLoughlin, Adam Mansbach, Arthur 'Nersesian, Nelson George, Neal Pollack, Thomas Morrissey, Kenji Jasper, Robert Knightley, Nicole Blackman, and Chris Niles.

Robert Reuland's *SEMI-AUTOMATIC* (Random House, \$24.95) is the second novel to feature Brooklyn prosecutor Andrew Giobberti. Giobberti was introduced in *Hollowpoint* and that adventure left him in the dreary circumstances that open the second: exiled from the Homicide Bureau to the Appeals Bureau. He is denied the opportunity to try cases, to sway a jury, to convince a judge. And he's given too many opportunities to remember the past. Then he is handed a case that will return him to Homicide and to action—of course, there's a catch.

Reuland launches Giobberti and the reader into the case with passion and recklessness. Take the case even though it comes with a second-seater, a young prosecutor handling her first homicide case. Take it for a chance for redemption. Take it because you love everything about the whole stinking process.

The case is the shooting death of bodega owner Habib al-Hamadi during a robbery attempt. The accused, Haskin Pool, has a fairly lengthy record. There is even an eyewitness to the shooting. Although it seems simple and straightforward, nothing is as it seems.

Reuland handles the action in the courtroom and the inaction of the judicial process with equal flair. As the unexpected intricacies of the case begin to unfold, Giobberti becomes aware of just how screwed up the case really is and is again thrust into a situation where every available choice seems to lead him deeper into the abyss. Written with wit and compassion, Reuland's Giobberti is hugely appealing presence—raw, vital, and compellingly honest in a system that values conformity.

Irene Marcuse's debut mystery, *The Death of an Amiable Child*, was an Agatha Award-nominee; her latest effort, the fourth in the series, is equally strong. *UNDER THE MANHATTAN BRIDGE* (Forge, \$24.95) again features social worker Anita Servi, although post-9/11

she is on a break. While more conventionally structured than Reuland's novel, it is hardly conventional in its vividly realized depiction of a Brooklyn community that is part Bohemian, part Jewish (Hasidim and orthodox), and part Jehovah's Witnesses. Anita discovers the body of a gruesomely murdered young Jew in her husband's cabinetry shop where she has been assisting him doing finishing work. The unidentified young man and the seemingly complete absence of information about his life or death piques Anita's easily aroused curiosity. But it is an unexpected encounter that leads her to discover the identity of the boy and propels her into danger and a collision of the normally insular communities of artists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jews. Marcuse deftly guides the reader through the welter of colliding customs, traditions, and beliefs all revolving around familiar crime elements: drugs, diamond smuggling, and murder. It is a heady combination, and the well-intentioned Anita—sensitive, probing, and courageous—is perfectly cast to negotiate the perils.

**ALL POINTS BULLETIN:** Four of the complex and satisfying novels of Arturo Pérez-Reverte have been re-issued in handsome trade paperback editions by Harcourt's Harvest Books. Available now are **THE FENCING MASTER** (\$13.00), **THE SEVILLE COMMUNION** (\$14.00), **THE FLANDERS PANEL** (\$14.00), and **THE NAUTICAL CHART** (\$14.00).

- Modern Library paperbacks has issued Cornell Woolrich's (a.k.a. William Irish) "quintessential noir" novel **RENDEZVOUS IN BLACK** (\$16.95).
- The Broadway Books Library of Larceny has grown by two volumes. **PONZI: THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY OF THE KING OF FINANCIAL CONS** by Donald Dunn (\$14.00) reveals the life and scams of Charles Ponzi; and **MCGOORTY: A POOL ROOM HUSTLER** by Robert Byrne (\$14.00) is the racy account of Danny McGoorty and his life as pool hustler and billiards champion.
- Harcourt has published two of Robert Wilson's Bruce Medway mysteries, previously available only in British editions, as Harvest originals. **BLOOD IS DIRT** (\$14.00), the third book in the series, was first published in 1997; the fourth, **A DARKENING STAIN** (\$14.00), was published in 1998.
- Dorchester Publishing introduces Hard Case Crime, a new imprint featuring hard-boiled fiction. Publishing both original novels and reprints of pulp classics, in inexpensive paperback format with original pulp art covers, the imprint debuts this fall with **GRIFTER'S GAME** (September), the first novel that Lawrence Sanders published under his own name; Erle Stanley Gardner's **TOP OF THE HEAP** (October); and Max Allan Collins's **TWO FOR THE MONEY** (November); and three new novels, **FADE TO BLONDE** by Max Phillips (September), **LITTLE GIRL LOST** by Richard Aleas (October), and **THE CONFESSION** by Domenic Stansberry (November).



# VOODOO

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RHYS BOWEN

Voodoo isn't often the cause of death listed in modern police reports, but that was what Officer Paul Renoir had written on the sheet that reached my desk at the New Orleans Police Department headquarters. Probable cause of death: Voodoo.

I was intrigued enough by this to take on the investigation myself rather than handing it over to one of my juniors. After twenty years in the homicide division of a big city police department, I had it up to here with gang bangs, drug deals gone wrong, and men who had smashed in their old lady's head simply because they felt like it after a night at the bars.

I called Renoir into my office. He was a serious-looking young man—shorter than cops used to be when I first joined the force, but broad shouldered and with a round, earnest face. He'd only been on homicide duty for a couple of months and was clearly ill at ease in my presence.

"What's this about, Renoir?" I waved the report in his direction. He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "What is it—some kind of joke?"

"Oh no, sir." His face became even more serious. "I know it sounds really strange, but the widow was so insistent. She said there was no other explanation. And the doctor was equally baffled."

I indicated a steel and vinyl chair opposite my desk. "You'd better take a seat and fill me in on the details."

He perched on the edge of the chair, still clearly nervous. "Officer Roberts and I got a call to go to the Garden District, possible homicide. It was one of those big mansions, sir."

"Mansions are usually big, Renoir. Learn to be brief, okay?"

"Sorry, sir. One of those big—uh—houses on St. Charles. We were met at the door by the distraught wife. She led us upstairs to the master bedroom and there was this man, lying there, dead. No sign of struggle, nothing to indicate he hadn't died of natural

causes. I asked her when he had died and if she had sent for her doctor, and she said the family doctor had already been there and he'd been as upset as she was. He couldn't find any other explanation for it either.

"Other than what?"

"That's what I asked her, sir. She looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Voodoo.' Then she told me that a month ago he had offended a voodoo priestess. She had cursed him and told him that if he didn't change his mind, he'd be dead within the month."

"I gather he didn't change his mind about whatever it was."

"He didn't, sir, and he started going downhill from that very moment. The wife said it was almost as if he was fading before her eyes." Renoir's own eyes were peering at me earnestly, willing me to believe him. "I really think you ought to go and speak to her yourself, sir. I came out of there feeling really spooky."

"Renoir, police officers are not allowed to feel spooky, even in the presence of a dismembered and partly eaten corpse."

He flinched. "No, sir."

I got up from my chair. "The best thing you can do is go straight back out there."

"Me, sir?"

He tried to keep his expression composed but the words came out as a croak.

I had to smile. "It's like falling off a horse. You have to get right back on, or you'll be spooked forever. You can drive me."

His face lit up. "You're coming too, sir?"

"Why not? God knows I need a good laugh."

"I don't think you'll be laughing, sir," Renoir said as he left my office.

An hour later Renoir drove as we followed the streetcar tracks out along St. Charles Avenue to the upscale Garden District. Here was where New Orleans Old Money was concentrated. We passed an antique streetcar with tourists hanging out of the windows, videotaping the mansions as they passed. They glared at us as we got in their way.

"Here we are, sir." Renoir pulled up outside the home of John Torrance III and his wife Millie. When Renoir had told me that he liked to be called Trey, the light bulb went off in my head. Trey Torrance was a familiar name to me, appearing regularly in the newspapers at some charity event or other. I looked him up in the files before we set out and found out that Mr. Torrance had been fifty-nine years old and still very active in his business life as well

as in various philanthropic organizations. He was, for example, a leading sponsor of the Bacchus Carnival Krewe. He had been born to an old plantation family across the river, inherited a sizeable estate of local land, and made himself even richer by putting subdivisions on it and selling it off.

I couldn't fault his taste in houses. Trey Taylor lived in a solid, square brick mansion with white shutters at the windows and an enormous magnolia grandiflora shading it. Nothing too fancy, no Southern-style pillars and porticos. But the gardens were beautifully kept and the place had an air of prosperity about it. We parked under one of the live oaks that draped in a canopy over the street.

"Thank God for trees," I said. "At least the car won't have turned into an oven while we're away."

I had expected the front door to be opened by a maid, but it was Mrs. Torrence herself who stood there, looking quite frail but elegant in a black and white striped dress and pearls. How many women wear pearls at home in the afternoon these days, I wondered. Especially when their husband has just died. I introduced myself.

"I'm so grateful you've come, Lieutenant Patterson," she said. "Do come inside, and you too, Officer Renoir. Can I fix you gentlemen a glass of iced tea or lemonade?" Even the death of her husband had not robbed this lady of her Southern manners.

"Nothing, thank you, ma'am," I said as we stepped into the delightful coolness of a marble-tiled front hall. She led us through to a sitting room that was decorated with understated good taste—good old mahogany furniture and some classy-looking paintings on the walls. One of these was a portrait of a man with a bulldog face of almost Winston Churchillian tenacity. Chin stuck out defiantly, brow set in a perpetual frown. Trey Torrance had clearly been a man who expected to get his own way and dared anybody to cross him.

"You don't have a maid, Mrs. Torrance?" I couldn't help asking.

She was holding a dainty lace handkerchief and she put it up to her mouth. "She didn't feel comfortable staying here after—after what happened. She said she could still feel the spirits flying around. So I had to let her go home, even though I'm not very comfortable here myself, I can tell you."

I gave her a long, sympathetic look. "Voodoo, Mrs. Torrance?" I asked. "What makes you think it was voodoo that killed your husband?"

"What else could it have been?" She almost snapped at me. "He

saw that woman and she cursed him and he died, just like she said he would."

"Whoa—go back a little. What woman are we talking about?"

"They owned land across the river. Swampy land. No good for anything. But then he managed to get his hands on some landfill and he was going to have it brought down in barges from Missouri. He planned to build up that land and put another of his subdivisions on it. Like I said, it was mostly swamp and grass, but there were a few shacks down by the river and this old woman lived in one of them. She refused to move out, even though she had no right there. They owned the title to that land. They went to see her and she warned him. She said if he kept on with this, he'd regret it."

"And what did your husband do?"

"He laughed, naturally. He told her he was bulldozing the place and it didn't matter to him whether she was in it or not."

"So your husband didn't take her threat seriously?"

"Of course not. Trey didn't take kindly to threats and he wasn't the kind of man who would believe in anything as ridiculous as voodoo. He came home and told me about it. 'Silly old bitch,' he said—I'm sorry for the language. Trey was rather outspoken. 'If she thinks she can scare me off with her mumbo jumbo, she can think again.'"

"And then what happened?"

"Then the doll arrived." She looked up at me with hollow, frightened eyes and pressed the handkerchief to her mouth again.

"A voodoo doll?"

She nodded.

"May I see it?"

She disappeared and came back almost immediately with something wrapped in a cloth. Inside was a simple doll, made of coarse unbleached muslin. It was faceless and featureless and might have been some child's toy, except there were red-tipped pins stuck in its heart and stomach and throat. I examined it then handed it on to Renoir, who looked as if he didn't want to touch it.

"I wanted to throw it away, but somehow I couldn't. I thought it might speed up the curse or something," Mrs. Torrance said. "Naturally I didn't show it to Trey."

"This was how long ago?"

"Just under a month. She told him he'd be dead within the month and he was."

"Is the body still upstairs?" I asked.

She nodded, her eyes darting fearfully.

"You'd better take me up to see it."

She led us up a graceful curved staircase to an enormous master bedroom. The drapes were closed, and the room had an aquarium-like quality. I turned on the light. The man lying in the bed looked peaceful enough, but nothing like the fierce bulldog in that portrait. He looked small and shrunken.

"Your husband lost a lot of weight since that portrait was painted," I said.

"Since the curse," she said. "He just shrank before my eyes."

"He didn't eat?"

"He started vomiting the next day, and after that he couldn't keep food down. He'd feel fine, he'd eat something, and the vomiting would start again. He got so weak he couldn't stand."

"You called a doctor?"

"He said it was probably a virus. He didn't take it too seriously."

"I understood it was a heart attack that killed him?"

"That's what the doctor said. The vomiting did stop after a few days, but Trey was as weak as a baby and he found it hard to swallow. Then he started having heart palpitations. He had had previous heart trouble, you know, and he was on medication. The doctor upped his dose of digoxin, but it didn't do any good, did it? I begged him to go to that woman and tell him he'd leave her in peace, but he was so stubborn, he wouldn't do it. Even with his life on the line, he wouldn't do it."

She started to sob quietly.

I stared down at the man lying in the bed and cleared my throat. "Mrs. Torrance, I'm sorry your husband died, but I'm not sure what you think the police can do for you."

She glared at me. "Arrest that woman. Make her pay for what she has done."

I tried not to smile. "Mrs. Torrance, you seem like a sensible woman. I'm sure you'll understand that there is no court in this state that would convict someone of killing via a curse. It would be thrown out before it came to trial."

"But she's just as guilty as if she stabbed him or forced poison down his throat," she said angrily. "You should have seen my husband before. He was a powerful, aggressive man—full of life. The moment her curse struck, he just melted away until his heart gave out. And even if you couldn't prove the voodoo curse, surely harassing him and making threats is against the law, isn't it?"

I shook my head. "If we hauled in folks every time they said 'I could kill you,' the parish jails would be even more crowded than they are now. And sending one doll through the mail doesn't amount to harassing. Did she send anything else?"

"One doll was enough." She looked at me coldly. "It worked, didn't it?"

I started to make my way toward the door. There was something strangely cold and uncomfortable about that dark room with its drawn blinds. I wondered if I was succumbing to the voodoo hysteria myself. "Look, Mrs. Torrance. I'll have the body autopsied to verify the cause of death. If it was a heart attack, I don't think there's anything we can do. I'm really sorry. I'm sure this is most disturbing for you."

"It's even more disturbing to know that people like Maman Boutin can kill at will and nobody is going to stop them," she said.

"Okay," I said with a sigh. "Tell me where I can find this Maman Boutin and I'll go talk to her."

She described where we'd find the shacks. I had Renoir call and arrange for the body to be taken for autopsy, then we paid a call on the family physician.

"I understand that you were uncomfortable about the cause of death," I said to him.

He was a dapper, fussy little man, the kind who wears blazers and has his shirts starched and ironed. He had a gold signet ring on his left pinkie. "The cause of death was a heart attack," he said.

"Brought on by—"

He shook his head. "The man was a walking time bomb. He'd had heart trouble for several years and yet he wouldn't slow down. He loved his beignets and coffee, and his bourbon and Seven-Up. Typical type A personality. Very short fuse. Upset him and he'd explode. The heart attack was only a matter of time."

"So you don't agree with his widow that it was caused by voodoo."

"Is that what she told you?" He looked amused, then shook his head. "She was very upset. She had told me several times that some woman had cursed him and I agree that he did become sick immediately after the supposed confrontation took place, but as a physician I'm not trained to recognize the symptoms of voodoo. I'd reiterate what I put on the death certificate. He was weakened by a nasty stomach virus and finished off by a heart attack."

"I'm having an autopsy done," I said. "Just in case."

"I don't know what you think you're going to find," he said, "other than a severely damaged heart muscle."

He escorted us to the door and opened it. I paused on the doorstep.

"So in your estimation there was nothing unexpected about this man's death?"



"Only that he went downhill so fast," he said. "He was a big bull of a man, and apart from that heart condition, he was never sick. He caught some little bitty virus and it didn't seem like anything helped."

"You're sure it was a virus?"

"If you mean was it a voodoo curse, all I can tell you is that there is a nasty stomach bug going around this city at the moment and Trey Torrance's symptoms were consistent with the other cases I've treated. A little more violent and severe, perhaps, but Trey also overindulged in his food and drink. And he probably didn't stick to the bland diet I prescribed for him. He wasn't exactly good at taking directions, as his wife will tell you."

"Thank you, Doctor." I nodded to him and we took our leave.

It was close to rush hour and it took us a while to cross the river and get free of the city sprawl. Then we were driving up Highway 18 with water meadows and the occasional horse swishing its tail in the shade of a live oak on one side of us and the great brown expanse of the Mississippi on the other. It was times like this when I asked myself what the hell I was doing shutting myself up in a big city. I was born in Kentucky, came down to New Orleans to attend Tulane, and stayed. But I was still a country boy at heart.

The last mile to the shacks across the river was on a dirt track. It had rained earlier in the week, and the potholes were full of puddles. We splashed, bumped, and slithered our way out to the shacks with Renoir apologizing each time we bottomed out in a particularly big pothole. That boy was going to have to develop some balls if he wanted to survive in the NOPD.

The dirt track ended, and Renoir parked the car under a sorry-looking half-dead tree. We got out and immediately I heard the whine. I barely had time to remember to roll down my shirt-sleeves before the mosquitoes descended on us in a cloud. Renoir wasn't so lucky; he was wearing short sleeves. He slapped and waved his arms and cursed under his breath.

"Why would anybody want to live out here, sir?" he muttered. "This is a hellhole if ever I saw one."

"Some people like the peace and quiet, I guess," I said. "And they like to be left alone."

"I'd leave them alone all right, if I got my blood sucked dry every time I came to visit."

We followed a narrow track through some bushes until it brought us out to a field of saw grass running alongside a bayou. Where the bayou emptied into the river there was a cluster of

shacks huddled together in the shade of a tree. The shacks looked as if they had been built in haste by a gang of boys wanting a clubhouse. There were holes in the walls, half-collapsed front porches, and boarded-up windows. A sorrier-looking sight I have never seen.

Renoir echoed my sentiments. "I can't see why this place was worth fighting over. You couldn't pay me enough to stay here."

There was a rustle in the tall grass to our left, and a big old gator slid down the muddy bank and plopped into the bayou. An egret rose from the water and drifted to a safer spot. The mosquitoes kept up their whining symphony. I could feel them biting through my pants legs, but as a senior officer, I was too dignified to slap the way Renoir was doing.

A skinny dog slunk out from beneath the nearest of the shacks and started barking at us. At this signal an old black man poked his head out of the door.

"Good afternoon, sir," I said. "We're looking for Mrs. Boutin?"

"Maman Boutin you's wanting?" he asked in a voice that sounded like a wheel that needed oil. "She don't take kindly to strangers."

"We're policemen. We just need to ask her some questions."

"She don't take kindly to questions," he said.

The mosquitoes and the steamy heat were getting to me. "And the police don't take kindly to being given the runaround," I said. "We can talk to her here or have her hauled in for questioning. It's all the same to me."

The old man shot us a look of alarm. "I wouldn't do that, mister," he said. "It don't pay to mess with Maman Boutin. She give you the eye, and you jus' shrivel up an' die. I seen it for myself."

"I'm willing to chance it," I said, and heard an intake of breath from Renoir standing behind me.

The old man shrugged as if I was a hopeless case. "She in that house over there," he said. "The one beside the tree."

That particular shack was half hidden under the great tree, with curtains of Spanish moss trailing down all over it. It was a pitiful structure of mismatched wood. New boards had been nailed on where old ones had fallen off. The roof had several patches of shingles missing, exposing the tar paper underneath. Being this close to the river I was surprised the place had survived at all. I had seen what spring floods could do.

We made our way between puddles to Maman Boutin's shack. The dog had been joined by another one, and they walked at our heels, growling softly. Not a comfortable feeling. Renoir made sure he stayed as close to me as possible.

"Do I really have to go in there, sir?" he asked.

"You afraid of voodoo, Renoir?"

"It's all right for you, sir," Renoir said. "You weren't born around here. We have it in our blood."

"If she's a real priestess, she'll know you don't mean her any harm. You'll be safe enough," I said.

As I started up the five rickety steps that led to Madam Boutin's front door, there was an unearthly cackling sound. My heart did a flip-flop as several white chickens, who had been sleeping in the shade on the porch, rose up, cackling and flapping around us. The noise produced a face in the darkness behind the doorway.

"I know why you here," a dried-up old voice said. There was a slight twang of French accent.

"Are you Maman Boutin?" I asked.

"That's what they calls me."

"I'm here to ask you some questions about Mr. Torrance. You remember the man who came to visit you?"

"He dead yet?" she asked calmly.

"He died this morning. May we come in?"

"I suppose you can. He can stay on the porch." She indicated Renoir, who looked visibly relieved.

I stepped inside and was enveloped in a darkness so complete that I could only just make out the form of a table and a straight-backed chair. The place stank of a peculiar odor—a mixture of rotting vegetation and sweat mixed with maybe chicken shit and some kind of sweet incense. I coughed and tried not to breathe.

"You can sit there," She pointed at the chair.

I sat. She took up position in an old armchair I hadn't noticed before in the darkness. I could barely make out her face. What I could see was little and wizened like an old dried apple, and so dark that it blended into the darkness of the room. But her eyes were bright enough. As I became accustomed to the darkness I could see that she had some kind of fabric wrapped around her head and several rows of beads around her neck.

"Mr. Torrance died today," I said.

She nodded as if she'd been expecting it.

"He came to see you a month ago. He told you you'd have to move out because he was going to build on this land. You threatened him."

"I didn't threaten him," she said.

"His widow claims you put a voodoo curse on him."

"I just warned him," she said. "What right did he have coming here and telling me to get off his land? What made him think it was his land, eh? I was born in this place. My mama was born here

before me. I tol' him I wasn't goin' nowhere. And you know what he tol' me? He said he gonna bulldoze this place and it don' matter to him none whether I'm in it or not."

"So you put a curse on him?"

She shrugged. "I tell him if he don't change his mind, he's going to be sorry."

"And you sent him a doll."

"I done what?" She leaned forward in her chair.

"A voodoo doll. You sent him a voodoo doll with pins stuck in it."

"I never sent him no doll. That's just mumbo jumbo stuff for tourists. Maman Boutin don't need no dolls to do her work, young man. If I say a man goin' to die, he goin' to die. I got strong magic. The *loa* listen to me."

"So you never sent the doll?"

"I tol' you."

"And you didn't send anything else? Did you give him anything to eat or drink?"

She laughed then, a dry, cackling laugh. "You trying to find out if I give him some kin' of bad medicine? Maman Boutin don' need no bad medicine. You policemen wasting your time here. If my magic made him die, ain't no way you ever goin' to prove it."

She wasn't stupid, I thought as I got to my feet. "I know that," I said. "But this is the United States of America. You can't go around killing people when you feel like it."

"Why not?" she asked. "Don't plenty folk do it in that city of yours? They shoot someone to get his wallet or his shoes or his jacket. That Mr. Torrance was goin' to throw these good folks out of their homes—homes where they was born, homes he had no right to."

"There are courts of law for that kind of thing."

"Everyone know the law don' listen to po' folks," she said. "That's why po' folks need someone like me to look after them." She looked straight at me. In the half light her gaze was intense. "You better go now," she said.

She reached to pick up something. At first I thought it was a stick. Then I saw that it moved. It was a snake. I had read about hair standing on end before, but it had never happened to me until now. I could hear a humming sound that seemed to echo from the rafters above my head as if angry spirits were flying around up there.

"I'm going," I said, and made for the door as fast as I could without appearing to rush.

"And don' come back," she called after me. "You jus' let us live in peace, and we won't bother no one."

I stepped out into the pink glow of a setting sun. Renoir was standing in the shade of the tree and he looked very relieved to see me. The chickens were nowhere in sight.

"Come on, Renoir. We're going," I said.

He needed no urging. We crossed the compound with giant strides.

"You think she was the real thing, sir?"

"I have no idea, Renoir," I said, not wanting to let him know about the hairs on my neck and the snake.

"Did you notice those chickens were all white?"

"I did notice that."

We crossed the compound. The dogs stood on the track behind us, tails still at the alert. There was no sign of the big gator or the egret. The path was narrow and we had to walk in single file.

"Did she admit to putting a hex on him, sir?" Renoir waited until we were safely through the bushes and beside the car.

"Not exactly. But she wasn't surprised to find he had died, either."

"There's no way we could ever prove a hex, is there?" he asked.

"I wouldn't even attempt to, Renoir."

"So this was really a waste of time coming out here?" He glanced up at me as if he might have gone too far with this question. "Or was it just to satisfy your curiosity?"

"Actually, it wasn't a waste of time at all," I said. "I learned one valuable piece of information. She didn't send the doll."

"She could be lying."

I shook my head. "That old woman might do a lot of things, but lying isn't one of them. If she'd sent the doll, she'd have been pleased to acknowledge it. She told me she didn't need dolls to do her work."

Renoir opened the car door for me. "Then who sent it?"

"That's your job to find out, Renoir."

"Me, sir? How do I go about finding out about voodoo dolls?"

I gave him a long, hard look. "Renoir, you can start to show some spark of initiative or you can end up as a sorry pen pusher. Your choice."

He nodded. "Yes, sir. Okay, I'll find out."

I took pity on the hangdog look. He really was very young. I'd probably been insecure and unwilling to tread on toes when I'd first started in the department, although it was so long ago that I truthfully couldn't remember. I did know that I hadn't wanted to come across as too eager or brash.

"You can start with coming with me to question the maid."

"Oh, the maid." He looked impressed. "Yeah, I'd forgotten about her."

"I'm curious to know why she left in a hurry. Was she really freaked out by the voodoo?"

"Are we going to question her tonight?" Renoir steered around potholes as we bumped down the track.

"Tomorrow morning will do. I'm in serious need of a cold beer right now."

"Good idea, sir." His earnest round face lit up in a grin.

The next morning I put in a call to the pathologist who was performing the autopsy.

"Any news yet?" I asked.

"Cause of death was a massive heart attack. Exactly what the attending physician had said."

"And tissue samples revealed?"

"Initial studies reveal the presence of a digitalis compound, which was to be expected, since it was prescribed medication."

"The expected amount?"

"I don't have details yet. Call us back later."

Then I took Renoir with me to visit the maid. Her name was Ernestine Williams. She was tall, big boned, and dignified looking. The only traces of her Creole ancestry were in her dark eyes and the kink in her hair. She didn't, at first glance, look like a maid, nor like the kind of woman who would have freaked over a voodoo curse. But as Renoir said, I wasn't born in New Orleans. I didn't have that fear in the blood.

"I'm sorry about running out on Miz Torrance like that," she said as she led us into a neat little studio apartment within spitting distance of the Superdome, "but it was just too much for me. Watching that man shrivel up and die—I never saw anything like it. And then that doll with the pins in it. I tell you, I got shivers all over."

"Tell us about the doll," I said, accepting a seat on a vinyl sofa covered in a multicolored crocheted afghan.

"Miz Torrance showed it to me. She said, 'Would you look what she's sent now? I've a good mind to burn it.' She said she certainly wasn't going to show it to him."

"Were you the one who normally brought in the mail?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir. The mailman came at nine o'clock and took the letters through to the master's study."

"So you were the one who took in the package with the doll in it?"

She looked puzzled. "No, sir. I never saw that package until Miz Torrance showed me the doll."



"Wasn't that odd, didn't you think?"

The puzzled look continued. "No, sir. I didn't really think about it until now, but sometimes, if I was out on an errand, Miz Torrance took in the mail herself."

"So you never saw the discarded paper from the package?"

"No, sir. I never did."

I leaned back in the sofa. "So tell me, Ernestine, how long have you been with the Torrances?"

"Going on seven years, sir."

"You must have liked it there."

She wrinkled her nose. "I wouldn't exactly say that I liked it, but they paid me well and the work wasn't too hard. Mind you, Mr. Torrance was a tough one to please. He liked everything just so, and if they were entertaining, then he'd follow me around breathing down my neck. And he'd do a lot of yelling."

"He yelled a lot, did he?"

She had to smile as she shook her head. "Oh yes, sir. He yelled a terrible lot. Anything that wasn't quite to his liking, he'd just stand there and yell for one of us to fix it. Miz Torrance did most of the cooking because he was so fussy about the way he liked his food."

"And Mrs. Torrance—was she hard to please too?"

"Only when she was worried that the master wouldn't be satisfied with what I was doing. She went to great lengths to keep him happy."

"And how did he treat her?" I asked.

"Let me put it this way, sir. If my late husband had treated me that way, I'd have clocked him one. Mind you, I think he really cared about her. He could be sweet as sugar to her, when he wanted. If he went too far and made her cry, then he'd show up the next day with a nice piece of jewelry or an armful of flowers."

I looked around the neat little room. "You didn't live in, then?"

"I have a room at their house," she said, "and I stay there part of the week, especially when they want to entertain. But I needed a place of my own to get away to, if you understand me. A bit of peace and quiet."

"I do understand, Ernestine," I said, rising from the sofa and watching Renoir rise from his chair by the door. "So what will you do now? Will you go back now that the body's been removed?"

"That all depends on what Miz Torrance decides to do next, I suppose," she said. "Maybe she don't want to rattle around by herself in that big old house. I can't say I'd be too anxious to sleep there, after this. So I guess I'll just have to wait and see." She

opened the front door for us. "I'll do what's best for her. She's been through a lot, bless her heart."

We stepped out into the sticky heat. Even at that early hour the air was so thick and heavy that it was an effort to walk through it.

"So what do you think, Renoir?" I asked him.

"She seemed like a nice enough woman, sir."

"Yes, she did. But sometimes it's the nice ones that surprise you. Check her out when we get back to headquarters. Find out about her late husband. I'll take a peek at Trey Torrance's will."

His eyes opened in surprise. "You don't think, sir . . . ?"

"As of this moment I don't think anything. Maybe the guy caught a virus and died of a heart attack. But somebody sent that doll. Somebody wanted him dead."

The will turned out to be simple enough. After several generous bequests to charities, including a large enough sum to his Carnival Krewe to keep them in beads for years, the remainder of his estate was left to his beloved wife. Mrs. Torrance was now a rich widow. I should have left it at that. God knows I had plenty of other, more pressing cases waiting for me—a young kid gunned down outside a dance club last night, a missing mother of four. But I was still intrigued by Maman Boutin. And I still didn't believe in voodoo.

Guys like Trey Torrance make enemies. Had some other developer got his eye on that land? Did Trey have a rival in another business deal? I wondered who else he might have told about the voodoo curse, who had come to see him when he was sick, and who might have sent the doll. I'd set Renoir onto checking into Trey Torrance's business deals, and told him to call me the moment he came up with the goods on the doll. I wasn't holding my breath.

In the meantime I paid another visit to Mrs. Torrance. I wanted to inquire about Trey's medication.

"My husband's medication?" She looked perplexed. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Only that traces of digoxin were found in his system, and I need to double-check that the digoxin was what was being prescribed."

"The bottle's in his medicine cabinet," she said, and led me up to a fancy-looking bathroom. Marble tub and crystal fixtures. No expense spared here. She showed me the bottle. "Here it is," she said.

"Was he good about taking his medication?"

"Terrible," she said. "Trey thought he was immortal. He'd never have taken a single pill if Ernestine or I hadn't brought them to him regularly."

"Thanks. That's all I needed." I handed her back the bottle. She held onto it.

"Do you think it's all right to throw it away now?"

"Why don't you hang onto it for a while, just in case," I said, giving her a reassuring smile.

I was good at those. I'd practiced them for twenty years, not letting a single muscle of my face betray what I was really thinking. In this case I had noticed the name of the doctor who prescribed the pills. I had noticed that sixty were prescribed on October first. To be taken three times a day. I had noticed that ten remained. Even if he had started taking them on the date they were prescribed, there should have been at least fifteen left. So either he had lost them or somebody had helped him into the hereafter.

I put in a call to the family physician. "Mrs. Torrance told me that you upped the dosage on his medication after his heart developed abnormal rhythms," I said.

"I did up it slightly."

"To more than three pills a day?"

"No, same number, just an increased strength."

"Thanks." I hung up again. My hunch had been correct.

As I walked in the door at headquarters, I was met by a very excited Renoir. It was the first time I had seen him animated. "I found out who bought the doll," he blurted out so loudly that everyone turned, for the entire length of the tiled hallway.

"Nice going," I patted him on the back. "Who was it?"

"A woman." He looked very pleased with himself.

"Great. That rules out half of the population."

He ignored my sarcasm. "Did you know there are voodoo stores right here in New Orleans? You can actually go to a store and buy gris-gris and *veve* designs and spells!"

"Nothing surprises me about this place," I said. "So you traced the store?"

"I found it on the Internet. You can search for almost anything these days," he said. "I went in and the owner said they usually sell these dolls to tourists, but this lady was definitely a local. Bought it about three weeks ago. So that proves it, doesn't it, sir?"

"Proves what?"

"That she was lying."

"Who was?"

"Maman Boutin. She lied about sending the doll."

"And what makes you think the woman was Maman Boutin?"

"The guy at the store said definitely a local. Maman Boutin looks and sounds like a local, wouldn't you say?"

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Did you get a description of the lady?"

"Well, no sir. I just assumed . . ."

"Rule number one if you want to stay in this job, Renoir. Get all the facts before you open your mouth. Come on—you're taking me back to that store."

Renoir was silent and contrite throughout the drive. He parked outside a row of small shops in what had become a touristy section of town at the edge of the old quarter.

The store clerk looked surprised at seeing Renoir again. Renoir looked mortified.

"I didn't really take in too many details," the clerk said. "But I remembered her because she didn't look like the kind of woman I'd expect to see in the store. She was middle aged. Hair just so. Well dressed. Tourists don't normally wear good clothes and high heels for walking around town."

We got back in the car. "Did you really believe that Maman Boutin would come all the way into town to buy a doll, Renoir?" I said. "If she wanted to send a doll she'd have made one herself and put her own magic in it."

"I guess so," he muttered, still contrite.

"So what are your thoughts?" I asked.

"My thoughts, sir?" He sounded surprised at being asked.

"This is your case as well as mine."

"The maid, sir. She did get out in a hurry, didn't she? And she didn't sound like she was going back."

"What's the first thing they taught you in detective training?"

He frowned. "Who benefits?"

"And who does?"

He kept on frowning. "The maid doesn't. She's just lost her job."

"And she's not mentioned in the will."

"The wife has just lost her husband."

"And has become a rich widow."

"Oh!" His eyes opened wide. "You don't think—his own wife? She seemed to be distraught."

"Let me give you one piece of advice, Renoir. Women are universally good actresses. Any woman I've ever met can cry on demand."

"But why, sir? What would the motive be? She's a little old to

have another guy waiting for her, and she was plenty rich before he died."

"Maybe she wanted to be rid of a domineering bully and the voodoo threat suggested an easy way out."

"How do you mean, sir? I thought Torrance didn't believe in voodoo."

"She helped him along with an overdose of his medication. She might even have found a way to weaken him first."

"Will we be able to prove that, sir?"

"The overdose of medication? Probably not. She can say he was forgetful, he was sick with the virus and didn't know if he'd already taken the medication or not. But let's just see what the tissue samples turn up, huh?"

I was right about that hunch too. They called from the lab the next day. There were traces of arsenic in the tissue. Not enough to kill; but enough to make someone plenty sick. I expect she thought she'd been clever, stopping the arsenic two weeks before he died, not realizing, of course, that arsenic stays around in tissue forever.

I took Renoir with me when we went out to arrest her. He had that perplexed look on his face as he drove.

"What is it, Renoir? You feeling sorry for her? A policeman can never have emotions about a case. You know that."

"I do know it, sir. And I can't say I have any feelings either way. What I can't understand is why she called us in. Her own doctor had signed a death certificate. It would have passed as a heart attack. There never would have been an autopsy. She would have gotten away with it, no questions asked. What reason could she have had?"

"She might have had a personal vendetta against Maman Boutin," I suggested. "She was a New Orleans native. Maybe Maman Boutin's mother had put a hex on her mother. Vendettas tend to linger on around here, don't they?"

Renoir shrugged.

"On the other hand," I said, "maybe she wanted a chance to tell the world what her charming philanthropist husband was really like and what he put her through. She might even have wanted to enjoy the limelight for a change, after always being in his shadow. You never know with women."

Mrs. Torrance never did give away the slightest hint of a motive to us. She remained silent and genteel right up to the day of her court hearing. But she wore a smart, two-piece outfit, with high heels and pearls, to the arraignment, and she actually paused in the doorway and smiled as the flashbulbs went off around her. ♪

# CONVERSATION WITH

RHYS BOWEN

*It's fitting that we received our first story from Rhys Bowen on St. David's Day—St. David is the patron saint of Wales, and Ms. Bowen's popular Evans series is set in the Snowdonia region of Northern Wales, where she spent her childhood summers. The eighth in the series, Evan's Gate, was published this past March. In 2001, she introduced a new series featuring Molly Murphy, an Irish immigrant/private eye living in turn-of-the-century New York. The first novel in that series, Murphy's Law, won an Agatha and the Herodotus award for best historical novel. Molly is now in her third outing with For the Love of Mike; it was awarded the Bruce Alexander Award for best historical mystery.*

**AHMM:** How has the Evans series changed or developed over time?

**RB:** I think the Evans series has evolved considerably since I started it. The first book reflects more the Wales of my memories. I wanted to capture everything that was uniquely Welsh, like the nicknames (Evans-the-Meat, Harry-the-Pub) and the chapels. As the series has progressed, I have focussed more on present-day Wales and a society that is less isolated and set in its ways. Of course Constable Evans has also grown as a character so that the later books have more depth to them, the crimes are more complicated and involve more character interaction and less whodunit.

**AHMM:** The books seem to walk a line between charmingly eccentric on the one hand and a concern with darker issues of rural life, such as the toll of hoof and mouth disease, on the other. Is this a tension that

you feel in writing the books?

**RB:** It is always a challenge to balance humor and murder, when death per se is not funny. My humor in this series satirizes Welsh village life and characters, but never touches on the actual crimes. The earlier books were definitely lighter. I think we have lost a little of the good-natured humor along the way as the stories become meatier. The annoying thing is that fans seem to like the lighter, funnier stories while I am most proud of those that touch on darker subjects.

**AHMM:** What are the differences between writing a contemporary series in a setting that's familiar to you and a historical in which you have no first-hand experience of the setting?

**RB:** Obviously Wales should be easier to write about because I have a feel for the place. I know how the people talk, how they interact, and what the scenery looks like. But this can be dangerous, because my memories of Wales may not accurately reflect the area today. I do go back almost every year, to check out sites and experiences I may need for an upcoming book, and I do have informants on hand who tell me, for example, when mailmen were given motorbikes.

Actually the approach to the two series is not that different. In both cases I am an observer, looking in on a way of life from the outside. I also visit New York frequently and prowl the streets where Molly lived and worked. Luckily there are whole areas of New York pretty much unchanged since 1901. I can read old editions of the *New York Times*, visit the historical society. I have also acquired many books of old photographs, which have captured the environment perfectly. In



the next Molly book I have set the story in a mansion on the Hudson and spent a most enjoyable time cruising up and down the river getting a feel for the various mansions.

**AHMM:** In Molly's series the setting is harsher and the protagonist edgier. What drew you to this setting and this character?

**RB:** I really like Constable Evans but he is sometimes a little too polite for me. I was itching to write an edgier, feistier character, one who didn't always know when to shut up. I also wanted to write in a first person female voice.

The other thing that drew me to the series is Ellis Island. When I first saw it I was overcome with the emotion and tension I could feel in those walls. There were stories crying out to be told. I knew I had to set a mystery there, so I made my protagonist a young Irish woman who has had to flee from Ireland and becomes implicated in a murder on Ellis Island.

**AHMM:** In *For the Love of Mike*, Molly goes undercover in a garment district factory. How is she affected by this experience?

**RB:** When I first started this book my aim was to give Molly a challenging case to solve, undercover in the garment industry. As soon as I started researching the abuses and conditions in the sweatshops I realized, as Molly also did, that there was no way she could work there and not become involved in the workers' struggle. She has a strong sense of justice and is compelled to work with the fledgling ladies garment workers union, with almost disastrous results.

**AHMM:** Both series have a strong sense of place. Do the implications of the setting ever surprise you or

take you in directions that you didn't expect?

**RB:** Interesting question. I had never intended Molly to get involved in the garment workers' struggles. When I started writing *Evan Only Knows*, I just knew that Evan had to go to South Wales to visit his mother. Then the foot and mouth epidemic struck and I realized it was such an overwhelming event for an area where sheep farming is the major industry that it would have to feature in the story. Incidentally I got a hate letter after that book, condemning me for killing sheep!

**AHMM:** How was the experience of writing the New Orleans story in this issue similar, or different, to that of writing your other works?

**RB:** I have no idea what suddenly made me come up with New Orleans and voodoo as a theme. We lived in South Texas for three years so that whole bayou region with water meadows and Spanish moss, gators, and mosquitoes was very real to me. I also think that New Orleans is a fabulous place to write about. It's one of those few places where past and present merge into one and where you really can believe in voodoo and spirits.

**AHMM:** Is writing a short story much different than writing a novel?

**RB:** Writing a short story is always a challenge. It's like preserving a moment in a little snow globe. The writer has to give the sense of place, the feeling for the characters, and a plot all within a few pages. The decision on how much to show, when to come in on the story, and when to leave are crucial. I think that every novelist should write a short story from time to time to hone her skills.

# PIECEWORK

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DAVID GRACE

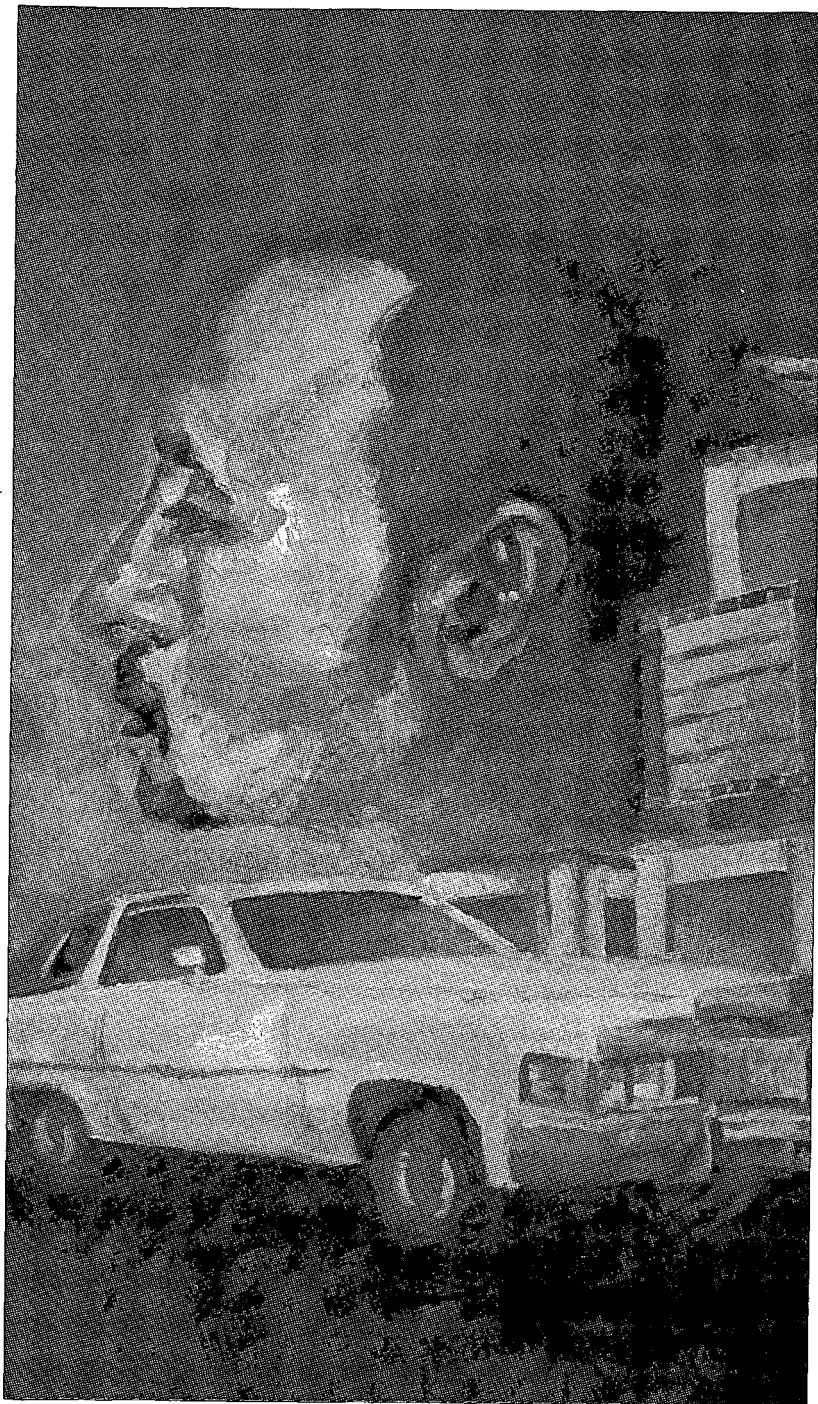
**I**t was a late December night, bitter and black, when Eddie Montefusco made his last transaction of the dying year. Crouched behind the wheel of his midnight blue DeVille, Eddie watched the distant lights of the Brooklyn Bridge blur into yellow smears as the windshield fogged with his exhalations. Air tinged with the scent of rusty iron crept in past the seals of the closed doors. The Caddy was parked in the back of a sagging, five-story brick and wood factory that had produced sewing machine parts sometime around the turn of the century and now was the partitioned headquarters of a number of marginal enterprises—an importer and distributor of Taiwanese toys, a wholesale meat packer, a bootleg tape and record duplicator, a fake charity boiler room, and half a dozen more.

A little after nine, Joe “the Crow” DiSalvo arrived in his old Buick and pulled up pointing the other way, driver’s window to driver’s window. Motors hummed as both men rolled down the glass. The moonless sky made Joe’s dark skin even duskier, his eyes barely more than round, black disks.

“Any problems?” Joe asked, glancing around the deserted lot.

“Only that I’m gonna freeze my ass off if we don’t do this thing.”

Joe took another quick look into the corners of the lot. “Right,” he grunted, then pulled forward until the two trunks were side by side with the cars pointed in opposite directions. They called him Joe the Crow because of his dark skin, blacker even than lots of colored people. Eddie thought of that actor, George Hamilton, and smiled. Joe would have been happy if they had called him “Joe the Actor” instead of “Joe the Crow.” All those jokes—“Hey, Joe, you sure your family didn’t take a detour to Africa on the way over from Sicily?”—drove him nuts, and after a lifetime of fighting, rage now simmered in Joe’s heart at a constant low boil. It was something that made him a good guy to boss a crew. Nobody crossed Joe the Crow or held out on his share. No trucker with a wife and



a couple of kids out on Staten Island was going to say "no" to him or disbelieve him when Joe said that if the truck wasn't parked at a certain place at a certain time that the guy was going to have a really painful accident. One of these days Joe was going to go off on a made guy or a guy with connections, or he'd be on the wrong side of a war, and the cops were going to find Joe the Crow with his brains on his shoes.

The Crow had removed the pistols from their original shipping containers and re-packed them in two Ken-L Ration pet food cartons, six flat boxes per layer, four layers per carton. The clips were stashed inside a couple of boxes labeled "Milk Bone Dog Biscuits—Large." Eddie checked a couple of the pieces, verified that they were brand new in their original plastic wrapping, and nodded to the Crow as he handed over an envelope containing twenty-five hundred dollars, fifty per gun and an extra hundred for the clips.

"You know, you're gettin' a hell of deal on these," the Crow complained as he dropped the boxes into the DeVille's big trunk.

"Yeah, they look like they're in good shape," Eddie said in a flat voice, directing his breath into his cupped hands.

"Good shape? These pieces are brand new! They're worth two, three hundred easy."

Eddie breathed into his palms again then closed the trunk with a solid thunk.

"If it wasn't for Jimmy D. standin' up for ya, I'd take these to Brooklyn and sell 'em myself to the Spics, get a hundred, hundred fifty a piece for 'em, no sweat." Joe the Crow glared at Eddie, daring him to disagree. It was all bullshit, Eddie knew. Joe might have a line into a freight forwarder who tipped him off about shipments; he might know how to bribe a teamster to give up his load, but he didn't know shit about selling guns—who wanted them, what they would pay, who would turn you in and who wouldn't, who you could trust to take them five at a time and not roll over on you and who you couldn't. Three days after Joe sold his first piece to some junkie, the guy would be rolling around in his cell, screaming out Joe's name for a little rhythm and a dose of methadone.

"Yeah, Joe, it's a good deal. I'll tell Jimmy D. we did some good business."

Joe swore as Eddie got back behind the wheel.

When Eddie drifted the big Caddy silently out of the lot, Joe, hands on his hips, glared after him, as if Eddie had just cheated him of his life savings. Eddie turned left on Sprague and headed toward the bridge. Joe was a diminishing silhouette in the mirror. But even Joe the Crow wouldn't screw with Eddie. Eddie was use-



ful, necessary, and protected. Anyone who screwed with Eddie would have Jimmy D. and the Old Man himself on his ass and Joe knew it. Still, Joe the Crow was half a whack job and Eddie was careful to treat him with respect. People acted stupid, after all, and they did things that got themselves killed all the time.

Only one light was on when Eddie pulled into his garage, a big one, two cars wide, unusual in Brooklyn, not like the fancy houses in Connecticut or on the Island. This was an old house from the turn of the century or before. Eddie had bought it cheap and spent a fortune fixing it up, tearing out walls, demolishing the old single car garage, adding extra features, like the hidden room between the garage wall and the back of the kitchen.

Eddie unlocked the tool cabinet and turned a couple of ordinary-looking screws to the three and twelve o'clock positions. A sharp snap sounded as a bolt withdrew and Eddie swung a section of the wall back on concealed hinges. The H&K's soon joined the model 1911 .45's, the Ruger .22's, the sawed-off twelve gauges, even a couple of old Thompson machine guns and some newer Sten guns with the crazy clip coming out the side. Eddie closed the door, turned the screws back to their original two and eleven o'clock positions, then let himself into the house through the kitchen door.

Elaine was in the bedroom, her face washed in flickering light.

"Objection—incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial."

"Sustained. Mr. Mason, please confine your questions to the witness's direct knowledge."

That D.A. was always making those same stupid objections, but Mason would still get the killer to confess on the stand by the end of the show. As if that ever happened, Eddie thought. Eddie frowned but didn't say anything aloud. Elaine loved that dumb show.

"The kids give you any trouble?" he asked automatically as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"They're fine," Elaine said in a rush that made it clear she didn't want to miss Mason's cross-examination. "Oh," she said a few moments later when the commercials came on, "you got a call. I wrote it down on the pad."

"Only Kent has the Micronite Filter," the man on the TV said.

"Paulie," the note said in Elaine's precise hand, followed by a Manhattan number. Eddie didn't ask what Paulie wanted. No one ever discussed business with wives.

"Yeah, this is Eddie," he said when the phone picked up. "I'm at home. You called me?"

"Eddie, listen, we need—"

"—I said I was at home!" Eddie repeated harshly. Jeez, the Feds tapped phones all the time.

"Yeah, sure. Willie wants to talk to you—now. He'll expect you at the Top in half an hour."

The Top was the Tip Top Lounge on Twenty-fifth in the city, one of half a dozen places the guys hung out.

"Tell him it'll be forty-five minutes in case there's some tie-up on the bridge." Eddie hung up and turned to Elaine. "I've got to go out. Business."

"But you didn't know about the second will, did you, Mr. Jenkins?" Mason's voice called from the TV. "That's why you lured Robert Martell to the stables. That's why you picked up that pitchfork. That's why you killed him, isn't it, Mr. Jenkins!"

"I didn't mean to kill him. It was an accident!" Jenkins whined.

Eddie couldn't see the TV, just the wash of light across Elaine's face, the tilt of her head, the soft smile on her lips as the villain confessed his crime, the swell of her breasts within her silk pajamas, how young she still looked even after having two kids, his kids sleeping peacefully down the hall in their big, comfortable, paid-for house. Eddie marveled how good his life was and how lucky he was. Hurriedly, he walked over to the bed, bent down, and kissed Elaine passionately. After an instant's surprise she relaxed and opened her mouth.

"Wow, what's gotten into you?" she asked softly after he had pulled away.

"Nothing," Eddie said, "just thinking . . . nothing." He stepped back. "I don't know how long this will take." Elaine didn't have to speak. Her face displayed her thoughts as if printed on a page. "Nothing like that," Eddie said, more harshly than he had intended. "It's just business," he continued in a softer tone. "I've got to meet a guy, a guy, Elaine . . . Can I wake you up when I get back?" Slowly, the doubt slipped from her face.

"You know, Eddie, I wasn't—"

"When I get back." Eddie kissed her again, grabbed his overcoat from the straight-backed chair by the door, and hurried down the stairs.

The Top was jammed, but the patrons moved aside for Eddie as he headed for Willie's customary table in the back, a horseshoe-shaped, burgundy leather booth. Willie Bats, one of the Old Man's capos, sat deep inside with Bobby Metrano, his right-hand guy, to one side and Paulie Lozano, his gofer, on the other. When Eddie appeared Paulie slid out and headed for the bar.

"You ever heard about some kind of gun called an M-16?"

Willie asked as soon as Eddie slid into Paulie's seat.

"Yeah, the Army's been testing it. There's talk they're going to use it instead of the M-18." Eddie didn't ask why Willie wanted to know. Only a fool asked Willie Bats unnecessary questions.

"Can we make any money on it, I mean, if we had a lot of them?"

Eddie frowned and shook his head. "Not unless we're equipping an army. It's a military weapon."

"But it can go full auto, right, like a machine gun? There should be people who'll pay a lot for that."

"Only if you're taking down a police station or Fort Knox. It takes special bullets too, so ammunition would be a problem."

"You're telling me," Willie growled, "that nobody would buy these things?"

"I didn't say nobody." Eddie lifted his palms and half shrugged. "Sure, there'll be some crazy who wants to take down the First National Bank and thinks he needs a lot of firepower. Maybe some foreign nuts like those guys in Ireland, the IRA? I guess if we could deliver them to Belfast or someplace like that they'd pay pretty good for them."

"So, you could sell them?" Now Eddie knew where this was going. Willie had some deal where he was getting paid in these damn guns. Some jerk in an army camp owed the outfit money, and this was how he was going to pay off his debt. Willie wanted someone to turn the damn things into cash, somehow, some way. This was a ticket to disaster. The goddamn Feds would go nuts if one of their brand-new army guns turned up on the floor of some knocked-over liquor store.

"Look, Willie, this isn't going to work. It isn't going to make near enough money for the trouble it's going to cause. The damn things'll stand out like a sore thumb. They'll attract too much attention, too much heat to be worth the trouble."

"So, you're not gonna help me?" Willie said in a dead quiet voice.

"I am going to help you. You asked for my expert advice. I'm giving it to you. Forget these damn guns. We start selling them, we're gonna end up with shit on our hands."

"Even if I've got a buyer?"

"What kind of buyer?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing, nothing. It's just that—look, Willie, most people can't use these things. Anyone who can, he's probably big trouble. My advice is, let it go. Give this one a pass."

"Who the hell are you to tell me my business. Give it a pass?"



Screw that. I'm a businessman and I don't turn my back on money because some candyass is running scared."

Willie already had the guns, Eddie realized. He probably thought they were such a great deal that he had grabbed them right off and figured he'd get Eddie to sell them for a cut. Now if Eddie wanted no part of them, Willie was stuck with them, screwed royally, all because Eddie wouldn't do what Willie wanted him to. Now I'm screwed, Eddie thought.

"So, how long is it gonna take you to sell these for me?"

"I don't know."

"You've got a week."

Eddie knew things weren't going to get any better in a week.

"Willie, I don't know how to sell these guns. A week, a month, a year, it's all the same. I can't sell them for you."

"You're telling me you won't even try?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Now I've got to tell you your business? Make some calls. Look 'em over. Make a damn effort!"

"Okay, I'll take a look at them, make sure they're in good condition, check 'em out."

"Good, because—"

"—Then we'll see what we see."

Willie opened his mouth but Eddie cut him off, "—But I'm not making you any promises. How do I get a look at them?"

"Paulie'll take you," Willie growled, not even looking in Eddie's direction. He waved at Paulie who stood at the bar, watching.

"It's late, Willie, how about—"

"Take Eddie over to see the stuff." Willie spoke to Paulie as if Eddie didn't exist. Eddie frowned but kept his mouth shut. Willie did not like to be disagreed with, and when he was disappointed, someone generally ended up in pain.

Once outside, Paulie popped the locks on his gold T-Bird—pimpmobile, Eddie thought to himself—and headed for the warehouse district along the East River. Paulie pulled thirty feet down an alley between two gray concrete warehouses and unlocked a new deadbolt on a thick steel door. The power switch made a loud "thunk" and lights in the rafters blazed. The floor was a maze of wooden crates. Paulie led them to the far corner. Under a tarp was a pile of twenty boxes, each about four feet long, a foot high, and two feet wide. Paulie grabbed a crowbar and levered up one of the lids. Six new M-16s were racked into frames inside.

"Them two are the bullets," Paulie said, pointing to a pair of square crates at the end of the row.

"How the hell is the army going to lose these things and not notice they're missing? Crap, you might as well steal a tank or a goddamn atomic bomb!"

"Don't worry about it. Willie, he's got it covered."

"Yeah, sure he does. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Which one do you want?"

"What?"

"Willie wants you to check 'em out, make sure they work right. He don't know nothin' about guns, 'cept how to grease a guy." Paulie cackled at his own joke. Eddie scowled and looked longingly at the door, then reluctantly pulled one of the weapons from the case. "Better take some bullets if you're gonna test it out."

"Shit!"

Taking Eddie's curse for agreement, Paulie pried open one of the ammo crates and handed Eddie a box of twenty-five cartridges.

Twenty minutes later Paulie pulled up next to the DeVille and waited while Eddie put the gun and ammo into the Caddy's trunk, then he floored it, screeching off into the night. Eddie slammed the trunk lid, then kicked the driver's side rear tire, shouting "Damn! Damn! Damn!" with each blow. This is not gonna turn out well, Eddie told himself over and over as he headed down the half-deserted streets toward the bridge. Three blocks on the Brooklyn side Eddie proved himself a prophet when a red light appeared in his rear view mirror.

Eddie pulled over and a dirty blue and white NYPD cruiser parked behind him. Eddie rolled down the window, but the cop stood back with his palm resting on the butt of his gun. A second patrolman took a position at the Caddy's rear with an angle on the driver's door.

"Step out of the car, please," the cop ordered.

Eddie carefully exited and kept his hands palms up and in plain sight. "What's the problem, Officer?" he asked politely.

"Step to the rear of the vehicle, please." Walking slowing and carefully, Eddie complied. The second cop turned a flashlight on Eddie's face. "License, please."

Eddie slowly removed his wallet and handed over his license.

"We've had a report of a car like this one used in a robbery," the cop explained in a more polite tone.

"I understand. I appreciate the job you do."

"Is this your current address?"

"Yes, it is."

"Is this car registered to you?"

"Yes, it's my car."

The cop looked Eddie up and down, his gabardine slacks, white shirt, sport coat, then at the year-old Cadillac. He nodded and returned Eddie's license. The flashlight beam flicked off and Eddie's vision began to return. For a moment Eddie relaxed and exhaled a long breath, then he noticed the black Ford parked fifty feet behind the cruiser and the two silhouettes outlined against the glass.

Right on cue, the second cop pointed to a dead passenger-side taillight.

"What happened to your taillight?"

Eddie stared at it, not even surprised. "Jeez, I don't know. I guess it burned out."

"We'll have to give you an equipment violation ticket."

Here it comes.

"Would you mind opening the trunk, Mr. Montefusco?"

"What for?"

"We need to check the wiring on the light, make sure it's not shorted out. It could cause a fire."

"I'm sure it's just a burned-out bulb. I'll replace it tomorrow and come into the precinct to get it signed off."

"We had a bad trunk fire a couple of weeks ago, set off the gas tank. Destroyed a couple of parked cars, a real mess. We'd better check this out, just to be safe." The cop nodded to his partner who leaned into the car and retrieved the keys.

"I don't agree to my car being searched," Eddie said as the first cop headed for the trunk.

"We're not searching your car, Mr. Montefusco. We're just making a safety check."

The first cop turned the key and the trunk light gleamed dully from the M-16's matte black plastic stock.

"Whoa, what's this?" the cop said in mock surprise as he picked up the weapon. The second cop lifted the box of shells. "Twenty-five .223 cartridges? What were you planning to do with these, Mr. Montefusco?"

"This is an illegal search. I want to talk with an attorney."

"Hands on the car, please," the first cop said in an almost bored voice. After patting Eddie down and cuffing his hands behind him, they turned off the Caddy's lights and led him to the black Ford parked down the street.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You can sit down in that car while we wait for instructions. Maybe we need to take you to the Feds, ATF or something. It's going to take us a little while to figure this out."

You say your damn lines so well you must've had the lead in

your high school play, Eddie wanted to say.

The cops put him into the Ford's back seat. A big guy in a white shirt and dark gray suit sat on the driver's side. The guy in the front seat immediately got out and lit up a cigarette.

"Mr. Montefusco, I'm FBI Special Agent Harold Bolger."

"I want to talk to a lawyer."

"Mr. Montefusco, how about I treat you like an intelligent person and cut out all the bullshit?"

Eddie glared at Bolger, then nodded.

"In order to do that, we have to have a little agreement. Nothing I say to you and nothing you say to me gets repeated to lawyers or judges. That okay with you?"

"Everything's off the record?"

"On both sides. Do we have a deal?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Turn around and I'll take off the cuffs."

Eddie rubbed his wrists and turned to face the Fed. Bolger was broad shouldered, with a slight gut and thinning, sandy brown hair. It was too dark in the back seat to make out the color of his eyes.

"Okay, Eddie, here's the deal. You're screwed."

"Look, if you're—"

"Eddie, I said no bullshit. You're screwed. I know it. You know it. I've got you with a fully automatic weapon and ammunition both stolen from a U.S. Army arsenal. I've got your prints on the gun. We both know I'm going to find your prints on the crate it came out of. And yeah, we know about the warehouse. I've also got a tape recording of you discussing the guns with Willie Battaglia."

"You've got a tape—"

"Willie should know better than to always use the same booth. That's just not smart. Now with all that evidence I can get a warrant to take your house apart board by board. I know you think you've hidden your inventory, but I promise you that we will either find it or you'll be left with nothing but a pile of kindling. Then your lawyer can sue the government for the next ten years trying to collect for the damage, and you know what, he never will. And even if you did win, by the time you paid the attorney's fees, you'd still lose. Of course, by that time, it wouldn't matter to you because you'd be doing six to eight federal time. Don't look so surprised. I told you I wasn't going to give you any bullshit. But let's say that your lawyer is really good and you spend yourself broke paying him, and he gets you out in only three or four years. Your kids are what, seven and ten?"

"You leave my kids out of this!"

"I'm telling you how it's going to go down, Eddie, unless we make a deal."

"A few years in the joint is better than dead forever."

"Eddie, listen to me. We don't have much time. Those cops can only keep this off the books for a few more minutes. This can go two ways: either you're a collar, we take your house apart and find your inventory, you go to the joint first on federal charges, then you get prosecuted again on state charges and take a trip up to Ossining for whatever we find in your house. In the meantime your wife goes on welfare, your kids grow up with a jailbird father, and you get out in time, maybe, to see your oldest graduate from high school, if he hasn't dropped out to get a job to support your wife, unless she's divorced you and married somebody else who's their new daddy. It's not a pretty story. But you've got an advantage here, see, because I don't want to do it. I don't want to wreck your life. I don't want to ruin your marriage. I don't want to destroy your family. Hell, I don't even want to put you in jail. You're not the guy I'm after, Eddie. I'm perfectly happy with you not doing one day in the joint, never even seeing the inside of a courtroom. I don't even want to put you out of business."

"So that's the other way it could go. You could go home, right now. No arrest, no record, no charges, no search warrant."

"If . . . ?"

"Come on, Eddie, no bullshit, remember?"

"If I cooperate."

"No, not if you cooperate. If you give me everything. Every gun you ever sold, everybody you ever sold one to. Every job they were used in. Every job you ever heard about. A heads-up on every job that's going to happen, everything you're going to do, everything you hear, everything. You're going to be a human tape recorder on everything, on everyone, no exceptions."

"Human tape recorder—human rat, you mean!"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I mean. You get immunity for what you're doing. You get to keep the money you make selling guns, so long as you pay your income taxes." Bolger's teeth glowed white with a quick smile. "And," he continued in the face of Eddie's scowl, "you get to keep your house, your bank accounts, your wife, and your kids. Kids who'll never see their father's picture with a number around his neck. Kids who'll never see their father in a jail cell. A wife who'll never be on welfare or hitting the bars to find some jerk to take your place and pay the bills while you rot up in Leavenworth or Sing Sing. That's your choice."

"You put the finger on murderers, sadists, stick-up artists, and

thieves and save your family, or you let them go on killing and robbing and stealing and you destroy your entire life. No—" Bolger said, holding up his hand as Eddie was about to speak. "No bullshit, Eddie. You chose this life. You chose these guys. You chose this job. You chose to put your wife and kids in this position. Don't blame me. I caught you fair and square. You knew the odds. You knew the risks. You knew what could happen and now it has. So, don't call me any names. Don't blame me. This is the life you've chosen. It's on you now to make another choice. Freedom—" Bolger brought up his right hand. "—or prison." He raised his left. "Family or dirtbag killers. Which one is it going to be?"

"If they find out . . ." And that's when Bolger knew he had him.

"They might. You're surprised I didn't give you the 'no one will ever know' speech. Come on, we're both grownups here. Somebody might put two and two together; some clerk might get bribed and go rummaging through the files; some asshole Assistant U.S. Attorney might figure he's got to put you on the stand if the case is big enough and he can't make it any other way. If that happens, we'll give you and your family new identities, a new home in another city, a new job, a new life. Can I guarantee your safety? Who's kidding whom? There are no goddamn guarantees in life, Eddie. You know that.

"You could be sitting in the deli drinking a cup of coffee and eating a prune Danish and some asshole hits the gas instead of the brake and punches your ticket right there. Life isn't perfect and I'm not going to tell you it is. What I will tell you is that I won't lie to you, that I will keep you out of jail if you play it straight with me, and that I'll do my damndest to protect you and your family. And that's a lot. So, do you want to go home or do you want to go to jail?"

Eddie looked through the windshield at the two cops. "If either of them talk . . ."

"The tall one, his older brother's an agent. I've known the kid since he was fourteen. I helped him get on the force. I'm going to get him into the Bureau in a couple of years. He's as straight as they come. His partner is Jerry Amici. His father and his mother and his older brother were killed when the mob blew up their dry cleaning shop when they went to the cops rather than pay protection. He'd rather have his tongue ripped out than give your friends the time of day. I picked them very carefully. You never have to worry about either of them."

Eddie paused a long heartbeat then looked Bolger in the eye. "So how will this work?"

"I'll call you tomorrow. We'll set up a meet and go over the rules. We'll get together from time to time with a tape recorder. You'll give me a complete history of everything you've ever done and I'll get you full immunity. I'll give you an emergency number if you hear anything I need to know about. We'll work out all the details tomorrow. Any other questions?"

"No."

"You're clear about the rules? You change your mind, you're toast."

"I'm not stupid. Once I do this, once I talk to you, I can never go back. They find out I ever talked to you, it doesn't matter what you charge me with. They find out and I do one day in the joint, I don't come out alive."

"Okay, we have a deal," Bolger said, and did something that surprised Eddie. He held out his hand. Eddie stared at it for a long moment, shivered, knowing that his life had irrevocably changed, then, slowly, reached out his own hand.

**T**he house was dark when Eddie pulled into the garage, well past two. The middle tread in the stairs squeaked louder than usual it seemed to him. The kids were asleep, the little whines of their breathing barely audible in the long upstairs hall. Eddie undressed in the dark and left his clothes in a pile just inside the bedroom door. As he slipped into bed he charted Elaine's even breaths, a pattern he knew so well after all these years. He stared at her, the faint outline of her face in the dark, and was amazed at how desperately he loved her, as if she, or he, had died and then come back to life to discover that what had been lost had been magically restored.

"Eddie?" Elaine mumbled half asleep.

"Elaine!" Eddie said in an almost repressed shout.

"Eddie?" Elaine whispered, sleepy but awakened now by the emotion in his voice. "Eddie, what's come over you? Has something happened?"

"Yes," Eddie said.

"Oh my God, Eddie, what's happened to you?"

"I've had someone make me realize how much I love you," Eddie said almost as a hushed prayer, and covered her mouth with his. No more talking, not tonight, Eddie promised himself. He would be talking endlessly soon enough. 🐦



# THE FIGUREHEAD MURDER

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J. EDWARD BROWN

**I** clutched my glass of Fiji Bitter draft. It was good beer, made in a factory in Walu Bay, just down the street.

I moved my sandaled foot out of a pool of beer, or something worse.

Behind rusty intruder metal mesh over a window, a large colored photograph of a young-looking Queen Elizabeth II in a tiara and various decorations smiled at the drinkers.

The fluorescent lights were harsh. This wasn't a dim waterfront bar for reflective drinking, it was for Pacific Island seamen, long-shoremen, and laborers to get as drunk as quickly as possible.

It wasn't air-conditioned. It was very hot. The walls were tiled for easy hosing down. It smelled of rancid coconut flesh, stale beer, and tobacco smoke.

As money floated across the pools of beer on the wooden, cracked, once-varnished, now scrubbed and scabbed bar, the old-fashioned cash register tinkled, disturbing the cockroaches.

There were probably thieves and scoundrels of all types in here, but I was a murderer.

I had wanted to turn myself in to the police, but there was no evidence of my deed. Flora's torso was fathoms deep, and I had done it, no doubt.

I was brooding. If I'd had the money I could be said to be drowning my sorrows, but I didn't have enough cash to shut out my crime.

Then a good-looking young woman staggered into the bar.

I almost dropped my glass.

The bar noise died. Females did not drink in this place. It wasn't a tourist bar.

I knew the woman.

Sarah was a yacht owner, single-handed, out of San Diego. She had been in Tahiti, her yacht tied to the seawall three vessels along from mine. She'd been in Rarotonga after that.

Sara had long blonde hair. She wore a loose blue cotton muumuu, a string of black pearls around her neck, and expensive pink running shoes. She also had a lei of frangipani around her neck, that aphrodisiacal flower of the South Seas. I could smell their scent over the bar aroma.

Sarah was staggering because she carried the head and shoulders of my Flora. And I thought I'd never see her again.

Sarah propped Flora against the bar.

I drank my beer in one gulp and eased along the bar toward her. I wanted to clasp my hands around Flora, cuddle her, kiss her lips. I said, "My beloved, my beautiful Flora, you who breasted the waves for many a year, recovered from the deep, to live again."

"Get your hands off her," Sarah said quietly, sweetly.

"Where did you get her."

"On the reef."

"She's mine!"

"Finders keepers, losers weepers."

Flora had been lovingly grafted to the hull of my yacht above the cutwater to carry me safely across the Pacific. She was heavy, a little too heavy for a small yacht, but compensatory ballast had been stowed aft—every male has to make allowances for a female.

Weeks ago I had run aground on a reef and sunk. I'd taken to the inflatable and had been rescued by a Japanese fishing boat.

I bent down to examine her. Flora's nose was chipped and her paint had flaked. Once, she had had rosy cheeks, red lips, and a flowing gown of blue.

Had Sarah deliberately dressed to copy Flora?

Flora was all woman—proud, haughty, tireless. She was the eyes of my yacht, staring, day after day, but she had let me down. She hadn't seen the reef. She had taken the first crunching blow into hard South Seas coral right across her out-thrust wooden breasts. The blow had crushed them, but not too badly, obviously. Plastic wood would make them as good as new. All the damage was cosmetic, not difficult to repair. The bolt hole through her navel was gouged and splintered where she had been torn from the hull in the wreck, but again, no problem.

She did have worm holes, but she'd had those for a long time.

"Can I buy you a beer?" I asked Sarah.

"No thanks," she said, which was good, because I didn't have the price of another beer. I was broke.

"You could buy me one," I suggested.

"Yeah, right," she said scornfully.

God, she was beautiful.

"She's salvage. If you want her, show me the color of your money."

Genuine figureheads were rare, and Sarah obviously knew Flora was a prize.

I couldn't pay. I had exactly thirty-five cents in my pocket. I was waiting, a latter-day remittance man, for the insurance money.

I had been wanting to get back to the reef where I had been wrecked, seeking a passage on a yacht, but there hadn't been a yachtie heading that way. I knew Flora would survive, she was strong, she would be waiting for rescue, she wouldn't have lost heart.

I had been sleeping on the beach, eating from street stalls where the wharf labor ate. I wouldn't be here in the pub except I'd found ten dollars on the street this morning. I'd had a big feed in the Bula Cafe—six fried eggs, a plate of taro, a loaf of bread, and six cups of coffee. Now this, my beloved Flora had been found.

Flora was an antique, an original. What would the market pay? There was a marine museum down Walu Bay that might buy her. A rich American might pay big money in an auction in New York.

"Why are you carrying a figurehead along the street at night?" I asked suspiciously.

"I was going to put her in a bank vault," Sarah said.

I said, cunningly, "Banks are closed."

"She's too valuable. I can't leave her on my yacht."

Flora had no passport. "How did you get her through customs and immigration?" I asked.

"They made an exception, said she wouldn't become a charge of the government, couldn't do any harm."

Yachts could be bought at bargain prices in Suva, where there were owners disillusioned by the sea, battered by the vicissitudes of the Pacific, and prepared to quit if a buyer appeared.

I had in mind a yacht up for sale. She was big enough to carry a wooden figurehead.

I had hoped the insurance settlement would be quick. Yachting was like skydiving, or flying after a crash; a man should go up again immediately.

I had been wondering if I was too afraid to put to sea again, but with Flora, I could, and would, sail again.

Flora's chief charm: no chatter. She had an enigmatic, Mona Lisa smile, but Flora was more companionable than a living human crew.

In the calm days at sea I spent hours stretched out in the bow, communing with her, just being close to her as she started ahead.

"Why did you not see that reef?" I asked Flora, crossly. "You should have seen it."

There was no reply.

Sarah was looking at me with some amusement. She wasn't much of a drinker—single-handed yachtsmen, or women, rarely were, but nevertheless Sarah should have been drinking in the Suva Yacht Club.

And I should by rights abandon Flora, but of course I couldn't do that. I loved her and one does not abandon a loved one, no matter if they fail.

Why had Sarah brought Flora into the bar, at this time of night? Because she was chasing me, and she knew that the way to this man's heart was via Flora. I was flattered that Sarah was chasing me, but my heart belonged to Flora, no other.

I had a question for Sarah. "How come you fetched up at the island where I lost my yacht?"

"I heard your mayday distress call on the radio, went searching for you. You had gone. I found Flora when the weather abated."

Theoretically, Flora belonged to the insurance company, but I must have some rights. How could I get her back?

"Give you fifty dollars for her," the barman said, a six-foot, shaven-headed Fijian built like a wrestler. He leered at Flora and Sarah. "I've been thinking of opening a restaurant, she'd be good decoration, nobody got anything like that."

"I'll think about it," Sarah said.

Flora was hoisted onto the bar, to be admired. Somebody laid a wilted hibiscus bloom at her feet—well, at her stomach really, not having any feet.

The barman rambled on about his great-granddaddy having a copra schooner with a figurehead, but schooners were no longer seen, and neither were figureheads. The Fijians did carving, tourist stuff, heads, ornamental sticks. In the old days they'd done the ethnic thing, but it wasn't often seen. He patted Flora and I bridled.

Bar patrons approached and shyly touched Flora. Somebody bought Sarah a beer, and I got included. And another.

Flora was ritually toasted as each round of drinks was placed on the bar.

I was awash with beer, but I still had my wits about me. I'd have to make a move.

I whispered in one of Flora's ears. "We will elope. Get ready."

I made my move just on ten P.M. when the bar was about to close. I'd played football not so long ago, and I hadn't lost my skill. I scooped Flora up in a diving tackle. An outcry. I was dodging customers. Flora was heavy, difficult to handle, awkward.

I was running for my life, and for Flora's. I skidded in a pool of beer. I was out through the louvered swing doors and down the street, past the souvenir sellers sitting against the warm cement wall. "Souvenirs," they chanted automatically, holding up strings of beads and plaited baskets to this wild-eyed white man with half a woman.

It was a relief that I wasn't a murderer, but I was a kidnapper now.

I could hear footsteps racing after me. I didn't stop to listen. The barman could be in pursuit with that machete he kept under the bar for troublesome drinkers.

An Indian street vendor with a pushcart, pram wheels, selling hot peas and brightly colored sweetmeats, blocked my way. The ideal vehicle for transporting Flora.

I didn't want to do it, but I hijacked the cart, put Flora on it, and I was off, running like the wind, down toward the wharves, the wails of the vendor dying behind.

I was dodging between forty-foot cargo containers, running, running.

I could steal the yacht I'd had my eye on, sail tonight. The owner had gone home to Salt Lake City, abandoned his vessel. I'd send him a bank draft when the insurance cash came through.

I paused. Lighter footsteps, like from pink running shoes. Sarah! If she caught up with me my problem could be solved. Sarah would have to compete for me with Flora, of course.

I could live with Sarah and Flora, no reason why not, man was not made to be monogamous.

It was a hot tropical night, but Flora felt cool. Sarah would be warm. Together, the two of us, sailing the ocean blue, what more could a man want?

I stopped. And I waited for Sarah to catch me. 🐦

# THE RETURN OF THE DISAPPEARED

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GARY ALEXANDER

**“J**immy?” Ted Snowe said. “Can you hear me?”  
“Uhguhna.”

“Jimmy, I’m going to be disappearing you today. We can do this two ways. The easy way or the hard way. Are you with me?”

“Uhgunnageta,” Jimmy Knuckles said.

James “Jimmy Knuckles” Brutto weighed a ton. Ted Snowe had muscled him onto the motel room bed, partly seated, partly slumped. Nicknamed for obvious reasons, Jimmy Knuckles’s hairline was the lowest Ted Snowe had seen outside of a zoo.

“You’re gonna get me, Jimmy? You’ve got that backwards. And think about this—” Ted held up his blowgun. “Why did I put a dart in your neck that made you a zombie? Why did I haul you here? Care to hazard a guess?”

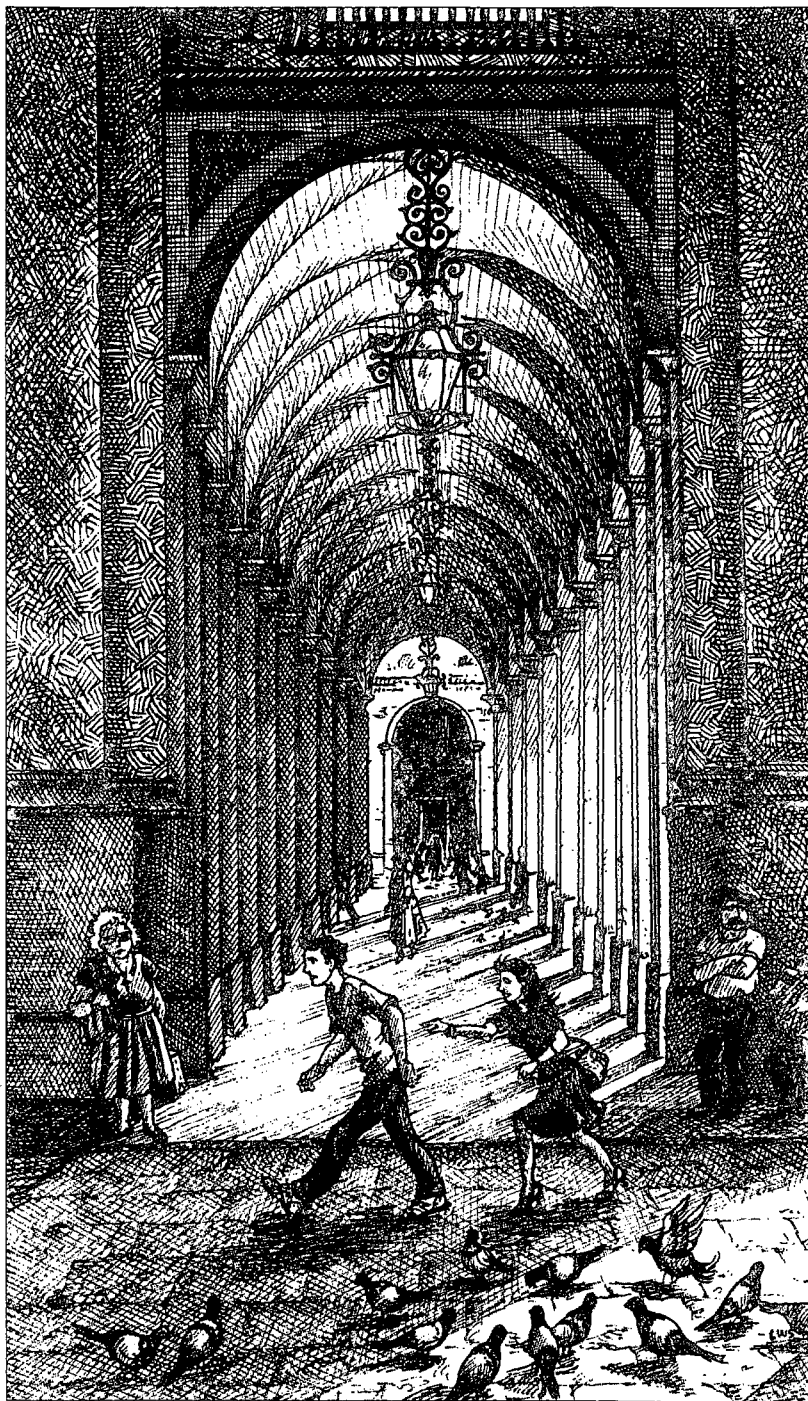
“Uhhdnha,” Jimmy said.

“Yes, you do know. I was paid to. How much have you been skimming?”

“Uhuhuh.”

“Nobody’s buying that, Jimmy. They know you were in the cookie jar up to your elbows. To mellow you, I used enough curare to drop a rhino to its knees.”

Ted picked a dart up from the nightstand. “The hard way is, I triple the dose. I wait until dark, go out and steal a car, load you in the trunk, and leave you and it at the airport garage. For good measure, I tie your hands behind your back—proof, when you’re found, that you’re a quote-unquote gangland slaying.”





"Uddawee?"

Jimmy was coming out of it. Ted would have to talk fast. "There's an alternative, which every other project of mine has chosen. It's entirely up to you. I have taken some liberties."

Ted tossed a passport on the bed, a Social Security card, a driver's license, and a library card.

Jimmy's eyes widened.

"The new Jimmy Brutto. Those are actual photos of you. Your name is Charles Abbott, Chuck to his friends. I had the pictures computer enhanced to match the flat-lens glasses and dye in the bathroom for your hair. There's a new wardrobe in the closet. You'll look like you stepped out of a beer commercial. The silk shirts and gold chain—sorry, they gotta go."

"Whadduygut?"

"They paid me to whack you out," Ted Snowe said. "You're going to pay me not to and for the trouble I've taken to place you in my version of a witness protection program. I'm no compassionate humanist, Jimmy. I'm double dipping."

"Don beliv sis."

"Believe, Jimmy, believe. It's reality. If I don't clip you, the next guy they send will. So what can you bring to the table?"

"Idnt skeh no mon."

"Ahem."

"No more'n nobod else'd."

"The word is, you have a serious gambling jones. Sports betting was your downfall."

"Nuuh."

Ted inserted a dart into the blowgun. "Maybe they've got you all wrong, Jimmy. Maybe it's office politics. You'd know better than I. They tell me what they want done. They don't say why. Don't ask, don't tell."

Jimmy Knuckles stared at the blowgun. "Tray stay. Tray stay locka. Key innasock."

Ted held his breath and removed oxfords the size of snowboards. He peeled off a sock and a key fell out.

"Must be uncomfortable."

"Case I gotta gu fa."

"How much?"

"Two hunnert large."

"Cash?"

"Stupa questa."

"In what denomination?"

"Fifees. Hunnerds."

"Anything else of value in the locker? Frankly, I'm a little disappointed at the amount."

"Scurtees."

"Excuse me?"

"Scur-tees," came louder from his twisted mouth.

"Securities. Worth what?"

"Dunno. Prolly lot."

"Tell you what," Ted said, standing. "I'll take half the cash and all the stock."

Jimmy squinted suspiciously. "Ha cuh jus half?"

"Because I'm a super guy and because if I cut-off your escape funds and you're nabbed or spotted, we both have a major hassle. I've got a vested interest in your new life. Are there restrooms near the lockers?"

Jimmy Knuckles was able to nod. A bad sign. He'd be off the bed in a few minutes, him and his homicidal temper and his catcher's-glove hands.

"I'll toss the key into the toilet tank in the farthest stall from the door. Deal?"

"Lemme thin."

Think until his limbs were functioning? No thanks. Ted Snowe puffed his cheeks and shot a dart into Jimmy's neck.

"Dubcraw."

"No double-cross," Ted said. "A booster shot to keep you calm until I check out that locker."

"Ish legit."

"If it isn't, we'll resume our chat. If it is, Jimmy, enjoy the rest of your life."

**B**eth Palmer Brutto tried to think of how to tell her mother nicely that she didn't give a rip about the country and western singer they were interviewing, how the singer had overcome so many obstacles—the trailer park childhood, the grabby stepfather, the booze and pills.

On the news segment of the show, Beth had seen herself on videotape, the reporter asking her how she felt when she learned that Jimmy was alive. James "Jimmy Knuckles" Brutto, the missing and allegedly assassinated former mob capo, was how he put it. The organized crime figure. In the three years they were married, Beth hadn't known much about Jimmy's business and hadn't wanted to.

The news crew agreed not to use her name Palmer, which she was going by, and digitally fuzzed her face.

Beth had said she was stunned. This was true, although "stunned" suggested she didn't know he was alive, which was sort of a lie. Jimmy had phoned her in the middle of the night two weeks after he vanished, drunk out of his skull, a normal condition for him. He'd told an insane story.

Jimmy was last seen going into a parking garage elevator, Beth was reminded by the reporter: In the months he'd been missing, Beth, he asked, had you held out hope?

Oh, gosh, sure, Beth had said.

Your reaction to Jimmy's fifteen-year-old girlfriend? he asked as they zoomed the camera in on Beth. That must have been a shock.

Duh. Yes, a shock.

To be replaced by a cornpone jailbait slut, Beth didn't add.

Jimmy and the young woman and others in her family were arrested in Mobile, Alabama, for manufacturing and trafficking methamphetamines worth millions on the street. The girl was in juvenile detention. Beth had seen a picture of her. Stacked was putting it mildly. She wondered what they fed them down South.

Your thoughts, Beth? Comments?

Beth shook her head. No thoughts. No further comment. Old dogs and new tricks, she'd resisted saying; if you knew Jimmy like I know Jimmy.

The country singer on the tube and Beth's mother were simultaneously dabbing a tear. Beth didn't think the singer had it so bad. She was worth a bundle, and as far as trailer parks went, Beth and her mother were living in one too, in suburban Seattle. "Môm, please turn that down so we can talk."

Beth's mom lit another cigarette and put a proprietary hand on the remote. "Honey, can it wait for the commercials?"

"Mom."

"You're frettin' over Jimmy," Gladys Marshak Palmer Wiley Johnstone Higgins said, squinting through her bifocals and cigarette smoke at the screen. "Who I told you not to marry."

"Right, Mom."

The doorbell rang. Beth answered to a thin, balding man in a gray suit who handed her a card. She recognized the life insurance company logo from the registered letter she had signed for.

"Mrs. Brutto, you didn't reply to our correspondence."

Age thirty, Beth was tall and slender. With her big hair and two staircase advantage, she cast the insurance man into shadow.

"I was going to call your office later on," she lied.

"Yes, um, current events, I trust you'll concede, have altered the situation. We require a refund plus interest."

In hotter and hotter water with the boys over issues unknown to her, Jimmy had batted Beth around toward the end. He'd gotten constant grief from the boys for marrying a cocktail waitress rather than a respectable girl from the neighborhood. Beth figured their days together were numbered anyway.

The only money she saw from Jimmy was currency he peeled off his roll. If he hadn't gambled it away first. She had answered life insurance junk mail and applied for a measly one hundred thousand dollars on him, just in case. If you wanted to split hairs, okay, she'd forged Jimmy's signature to the form.

The insurance company had resisted paying off on the basis of no corpus delicti. Precedents in Jimmy's line of work persuaded them to cave in when she threatened litigation and a very public trial. Nobody really doubted his fate. Beth cleaned up bills, paid the loan off on her mother's doublewide, and moved in. A third of the settlement remained in the bank.

Beth bent forward and asked sweetly, "How about if I kill him? Dead. And even provide a body. Then can I keep the money?"

The insurance man lurched backward. Beth slammed the door. It didn't solve a damn thing, but sure felt good.

The show was in commercials, but Beth Palmer was no longer in the mood for a mother-daughter talk. A hundred grand to repay and a divorce to buy. She picked up one of her mother's cigarettes and took up smoking again.

Ted Snowe went to Portugal on his honeymoon fifteen years ago with his ex-wife Shannon. It had been an *If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium* tour that blurred through France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy in two weeks.

Portugal was his favorite. Then as now, it was less traveled and more laid back. Almost everything was a bargain, and when he and his bride walked off a bus in the midst of a dazed horde, the people seemed a little happier to see them than elsewhere in Europe.

Fresh out of college, a tryout with the Detroit Pistons upcoming, wedded to a knockout of a yell queen, Ted Snowe had the world by the ass. But the marriage didn't last much longer than the honeymoon, and his tenure in NBA training camp was even shorter than that.

As an expat, Ted Snowe might go days without hearing American English spoken. Where he lived on the Atlantic coast, Vila Nova de Milfontes, two hours from Lisbon, the English speakers were visiting Germans and Brits. Milfontes primarily attracted summering *lisboetas*.

The woman anchoring *BBC World* was as English as could be. They had a flair for presenting sleazy American stories with smirking bemusement, and she was having great fun doing her gangster feature.

Stupid greedy Jimmy, Ted thought, watching him in jailhouse orange at his arraignment, head hanging. Methamphetamines and statutory rape. Incredible!

The resurrection of Organized Crime Figure Jimmy Brutto. The anchorwoman made it sound like a movie title. There were many unanswered questions, she went on. The victim of a gangland slaying was in the pink. He had quote "nothing to say about nothing" beyond "not guilty, Your Honor."

Jimmy Knuckles was Ted Snowe's lucky seventh project. Jimmy's *scurtees* turned out to be a rubberbanded wad of Microsoft IPO common stock, circa 1986. It had to have fallen off a truck at some level, then hastily stashed. There was a fine, brownish spattering on the top certificate. Blood?

Ted had been rightfully uneasy that complacency might claim Jimmy long before any other degenerative disease or a bullet. And here he was, undisappeared. What the hell was he doing with dope and a redneck kid?

Silly question. Because he was Jimmy Knuckles, that's why.

Ted Snowe shut off the television. He walked outside to a verandah and the undersized basketball court he'd installed in place of the lawn. His yard wasn't large. Imaginary center court was a meter from the alley, demarcated by waist-high flowerpots. Ted picked up a ball and drained ten straight from the foul line, nothing but twine.

The sunset drew him to the beach. Milfontes knew how to do sunsets. His toes ground into warm sand. His feet had toughened while he'd softened. Ted Snowe was a thirty-seven-year-old gym rat, lean and clean-cut and boyish. He looked like the bush league point guard he'd been.

It was mid May and balmy. A half-dozen other people were out. The crowds in July and August were less than overwhelming too. If he craved utter solitude, Ted could with minimal effort hike to several adjacent beaches and have them to himself.

He slogged into the ocean and stopped when chilly swells lapped at his kneecaps. Vila Nova de Milfontes was the same latitude as the Bay Area, so temperatures were not in bathwater range. Filtered by haze, the orange fireball plated the horizon copper and finally, as if losing its buoyancy, descended behind it. Ted stood until his toes were numb, then trudged out.

Jimmy Knuckles's feet were not cold. They were being held to the fire, as the saying went. He could either rat out his old colleagues or rot in jail on the meth and sex charges. Easy choice. He could describe his peculiar disappearance too, if he hadn't already.

How much did Jimmy recall of his abductor?

What to do, if anything?

Ted Snowe rationalized that he wasn't hurting anybody. In fact, he'd saved seven lives by giving them an option. And he'd never committed violence to anybody worse than a hard foul on a pick and roll. A guilty conscience was a wonderful thing.

Ted opened his unlocked door. You could do that in Vila Nova de Milfontes. Maybe he'd idealized Milfontes, but he'd been lucky so far. He took a Sagres beer from the fridge and drank.

Ted had grabbed a guy midway up the mob food chain and expected him to behave responsibly.

He wondered if he should have his head examined.

He wondered if he was one iota better than Jimmy and the others.

Leo Aspromonte was born the day his idol died. On October 25, 1957, Albert Anastasia, boss of Murder Incorporated, reclined in a barber chair at Manhattan's Park Sheraton Hotel for his last shave and trim. Nineteen blocks away, Leo's unmarried mother gave birth in the back seat of a '51 Dodge Coronet taxicab. The word *gridlock* hadn't yet been coined, but en route to the hospital they were in it.

The cab driver tried to be helpful, but he was no midwife. There was speculation that the cabby may have been too rough, too eager to assist in the delivery and ease the screaming mother's pain. Leo grew up to be a bright boy, but kind of funny in the head.

The funniness in Leo's head proved to be an attribute in his profession. A short, wiry man, he was versatile and tenacious and heartless. His eyes were as slick and black as glossy coal. He was natty and as well groomed as Albert would have been if his tonsorial visit hadn't been cut short. Leo Aspromonte truly enjoyed his work.

He'd been tagged the Asp since his first hit, a freckled, red-headed Westy not much older than his own eighteen years. Leo had surprised him coming around the corner in an alley and had fired a .357 round point-blank into his dumb, puzzled face.

The Asp was practicing his profession three thousand miles from home, in the Pacific Northwest, in suburban Seattle, at an establishment known simply as The Pub. It was a sports bar, a

squarish cinder block building that bristled with satellite dishes. The watering holes in this portion of the world were sports bars or casinos. To the Asp, the Northwest was an alien world of trees and mountains and pickup trucks.

The Pub's clientele was largely young, blue-collar male. They wore baseball caps and their names were stitched on uniform shirts supplied by their factories and repair garages. For protective coloration, the Asp dressed in jeans and pullover. Ball games blared on multiple screens. He sat at the bar, nursing sodas, wishing he had an aspirin.

She was bartending. They had trivial conversation. The Asp softened his New Yawk twang and made nice. One yokel teased her about her notoriety, a gun moll remark. She withered him with a frozen glance. Other patrons were solicitous of her, the Asp observed, perhaps excessively so, perhaps fearing her or fearing for her. It could be odd out here in the provinces.

The Asp heard her brief a waitress on the whys and wherefores of running the bar. She was taking off at ten. She had to get up in the morning and run her mother to the doctor for her blood pressure. Mom could be such a baby.

At a quarter to ten, the Asp left a tip that won him a thank you and a smile. He moved his car to three spaces of hers and lifted the hood. She came out of the bar as he frowned into the engine compartment.

The lighting was weak. The Asp created a small, diffused shadow. They were by themselves.

"Won't start?" she asked.

"Dead as a doornail," he said.

She dug into her bag for her cell phone. "I know a semi-reasonable towing company."

The Asp snagged Beth Palmer Brutto's arm. The little telephone went flying. He slammed the hood and pushed Beth inside the car. He slipped in behind her and laid the cool steel of an ice pick on her cheek.

"What do you want?"

"Information about Jimmy."

"Can't help you," she replied, trembling.

"Yes you can," the Asp said, pressing her cheek.

Ted Snowe enjoyed the narrow, winding roads and the manic tailgating. To him, driving in Portugal was a sporting event. He particularly liked a forty-kilometer span of the A2 *auto-estrada* between Milfontes and Lisbon. Traffic was normally light, so he



could open up his Audi hatchback, stretch its legs, blow out the carbon. By the time he decelerated to a toll plaza, he and the hatchback both felt better. Ted owned another car, a tin can of a Renault 4, which he parked on an adjacent street.

Ted Snowe, non-hit man. That's how he thought of himself. He'd fallen into the profession following a Continental Basketball Association game in La Crosse, Wisconsin. After a few brews with his teammates, he went to his room. In the fourth quarter, his assigned roommate had had his legs cut out from under him when he drove to the hoop, and was in the hospital for X-rays. Ted opened what he thought was a closet, but instead was an adjoining room.

A short, balding, sweaty guy was pacing the room and nearly jumped out of his shoes. He begged Ted not to kill him, that he'd give every penny back, and he wouldn't utter a peep. Ted was feeling no pain and thought the guy had a bag on too.

Out of curiosity, Ted invited him in for a drink. His guest brought an attaché case he white-knuckled on his lap. He claimed to be Shorty Hammerhill, bookkeeper for a mob family, now on the lam. He'd thought Ted was who they'd sent for him.

Shorty pleaded to stay the night. Ted said not a chance. Just then, they heard a commotion next door, things being kicked and tossed and slammed. When it was quiet, they looked in on the aftermath of a tornado.

Shorty told Ted if he'd get him to an out-of-state airport he'd make it worth his while. Shorty's own car was possibly being wired with a bomb as they spoke. Ted asked what worth his while meant. Shorty opened the attaché case and tossed a banded slab of hundreds that exceeded a season's pay as a second-string point guard for the CBA Rockford Lightning.

Ted rented a car, took Shorty Hammerhill to Milwaukee, and put him on a plane to Cancún. Shorty talked shop during the drive. Ted listened to mob gossip. He listened to who provided flawless false identification, for how much. He listened to opportunity.

Ted was fined for missing the bus back to Rockford. He was cut three games later when a better player came off the injured list. He embarked on a career even more tenuous. Thanks to a ditzzy girlfriend, he already had the blowgun and curare darts. Shorty Hammerhill was his inspiration.

Using Shorty's insider information and contacts, Ted spread word that he had disappeared Shorty Hammerhill after the goonish approach had failed. On a phone call to a prospective

employer, terrified out of his wits, he'd actually said, "Don't send a boy to do a man's job." Before Ted outran his forwarded mail, he received unsigned picture postcards from Shorty, from a string of exotic locales. Grenada was the last. The Spice Isle, according to the postcards.

Traffic thickened as Ted approached Lisbon. The city perched on seven hills on the Rio Tejo. Ted edged across one of two long, tall bridges spanning the Tejo. A fantastic vantage point, he thought; if only one could get out and gawk. Whether tall or short, old or new, Lisbon's buildings were capped with red tile.

In town, he burrowed into congested streets that didn't seem much wider than their lines on a map. His *advogado*, or lawyer, practiced in a third-floor office on a pinched one-way *rua* that reminded him of the floor of a canyon. Ted doubted if the street had seen sunlight since the Great Earthquake of 1755 flattened the city. There was a parking spot right in front of the lawyer's office. Ted couldn't believe his eyes. He pulled in, taking this as a favorable omen.

Lawyers weren't the pestilence they were in the States. He'd had to search for one to handle visa renewal, house leasing, and purchase of the Audi. Ted Snowe's Portuguese was workable, but the paperwork and bureaucracy flummoxed him.

His *advogado* did not practice criminal law. Ted figured that if that need arose, he could make a recommendation. They completed their business quickly. Ted left his car in the precious space and walked to the next block to a store he had noticed and bought a computer with all the trimmings. It was high time he upgraded his old machine. He needed to stay up to speed on Jimmy. Ted couldn't be absolutely certain he hadn't left a trail.

He checked into the Hotel Presidente. They had no on-site parking, so he paid a bellman to tuck the Audi securely away overnight. While he could stow much of the gear under the hatch cover, the monitor box on the back seat was just too tempting. He then walked to a big late lunch that should hold him until breakfast. Ted cooked for himself and couldn't get accustomed to the European dinner hour that commenced at seven thirty.

Tomorrow's big soccer match was plastered on the front pages of the Lisbon papers. Sporting of Lisbon was playing hated FC Porto for the league championship, Portugal's Super Bowl. Maybe he'd stay an extra night and try to score a ticket.

Ted thought he could have been a decent soccer player if basketball hadn't consumed him. He liked the flow and purity of

what the Brits called the beautiful game. It was democratic too. You didn't have to be tall or massive. In fact, those characteristics were disadvantages.

Ted bought the *International Herald-Tribune*, which was printed in Madrid, sat in the hotel bar with a beer, and read the paper. He decided he'd watch the big game right here if a ticket didn't materialize, but a picture in the *Herald-Trib* changed that plan. Ralph Buffet was standing in front of a thicket of microphones. Ted barely recognized him. His complexion had cleared up. He was wearing a spiffy sport jacket, without the thick glasses and pocket pen protector that Ted remembered.

Ralph Buffet and Ron Klingerhagen had formed RBRKTurboWare in Ron's garage. Most people didn't know RBRKTurboWare was in their computers, but they ran better because it was. Ralph and Ron were twenty-something multizillionaires in arrested adolescence. Then Ralph made some maneuvers behind the scenes, siphoning money, arranging a hostile takeover to boot Ron out of the picture.

Ron hired Ted, and Ralph became his fifth. He cried and begged and wanted his mommy. Ted had felt rotten. He swore he'd never do another project who wasn't a hard-core bad guy.

Of course no body was found, but Ron Klingerhagen was expected to be charged with murder. Animosity between the partners was no secret and circumstantial evidence was strong. Now Ralph was "coming out," thanks to the devotion of the woman he loved, Gloria, the Las Vegas showgirl at his side in the picture. Ralph never knew what he'd missed while working eighteen-hour days as a computer geek.

Gloria had been a recent televangelist convert. She had given Ralph the courage to come forward, to do the right thing. And to claim his stock options, et cetera, Ted thought. Gloria looked like she knew how to spend money, religion or no religion.

Ralph Buffet went on to say he had a remarkable story to tell the authorities. A story of treachery bordering on Cain and Abel. A most unusual contract murder.

Ted Snowe went upstairs to pack.

Beth Palmer Brutto knew there weren't unlimited ways to get from Seattle to Lisbon, but she almost fainted when she saw the ice pick sicko. She glimpsed him as he boarded in first class, talking on a cell phone. The Boeing 747 was packed, so Beth was hoping she'd be lost back in steerage.

Beth supposed she was alive because he hadn't been paid to kill

her. Beth wasn't afraid. She knew what she was dealing with. The trick would be to see him before he saw her.

She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, to make the nine-hour leg to London pass by quickly. She couldn't sleep, though. Jimmy's nutty call continually intruded. Him blathering drunkenly that he'd been shot in the neck with a blowgun by a guy he'd once seen play pro basketball. The ball player-hit man taking Jimmy to a hotel room and giving him a choice of how he wanted to be disappeared. Dead. Or alive and poorer.

It made sense now. Before Jimmy had turned mean to her, he was a big lovey bear who left something to be desired in the smarts department. She came to regard him as an idiot savant. He remembered each game he'd bet on throughout the years—the box scores, the players, their tendencies, the key plays that had cost him.

While in Chicago, the Bulls and Blackhawks were on the road, so Jimmy attended a minor league basketball game in nearby Rockford. Naturally he'd bet heavily and naturally he'd lost. Despite his encyclopedic storehouse of trivia, he invariably wound up on the wrong side of the line.

The Rockford Lightning's point guard, while playing a generally solid game (six points, one rebound, four assists), turned the ball over twice in the last eighty-four seconds. Thanks to Ted Snowe, the visiting Albany Patroons won and Jimmy lost.

Snowe, Jimmy raved, was too bleeping short and couldn't go to his left off the dribble, whatever that meant. Furthermore, Snowe, Snow with an *e*, was maybe in "Lithuania or one of them places on account of a piece of luggage in the corner of the hotel room with a LIS tag on it." Poor dense Jimmy.

Upon landing at Heathrow, Beth inquired about the configuration of the Lisbon plane. When informed it was single-class and one aisle, she rebooked on a later flight. She'd have nowhere to hide. Her plan was sketchy, but her goal was to recover the hundred grand and expenses. She was entitled.

Even with the sicko's head start, she figured she had a jump on finding Ted Snowe. Beth had given him everything but a name.

As the Asp boarded at Seattle, Jimmy Knuckles's Alabama lawyer had phoned him. He asked to be remembered kindly to the Asp's employers and filled in the gaps of Jimmy's demented tale, including his name—Theodore Snowe. The Asp made a call to Lisbon from Heathrow and took the two hour and forty minute flight to the Portuguese capital.



Beth waited in a Heathrow terminal for her flight, reading British tabloids. Besides the latest dirt on the royal family: DEAD THUG RESURRECTS ON MUM'S PINE BOX. LOSES RUG AND FREEDOM.

Hank Tom Fenner, an American labor racketeer under indictment, had disappeared two years earlier, a presumed assassination victim, à la Jimmy Hoffa. He'd attended his mother's funeral in mufti. In a paroxysm of grief, the bloke had thrown himself on his mum's coffin, dislodging his toupee and making himself recognizable. Beth thought this was an oddly familiar theme.

Back home, Ted Snowe watched Porto and Sporting play a dull, rough nil-nil draw. It reminded him of an NBA playoff game. The rematch was scheduled for the middle of the week. He lost interest. He might not even be in Portugal by then.

He went online and surfed for a while. There were links for anything and everything. Curare and blowguns, for instance. Ted had lived with a ditzzy junior college chemistry teacher, whose concept of travel was TV travelogues and primitive hunting artifacts. After he met Shorty Hammerhill, the tools of his new trade were already in place.

Ted buckled down and concentrated on news and media.

Jimmy Knuckles. Ralph Buffet. They'd let him down big time, and Ted was brought up on the credo that a deal was a deal.

He typed in names, seeing if the vast ether octopus nibbled. He went in order, beginning with Shorty Hammerhill. Zilch on him. Ted hoped Shorty was under a Grenadian palm tree this minute, rum punch in hand.

All clear until project number four. Ted thought he'd lose his dinner watching Hank Tom Fenner lose his rug. Travel expenses and fabrication of new identities cost Ted Snowe an average of seventeen thousand dollars per. Hank Tom's hairpiece set Ted back fifteen hundred alone.

Ted shut down. It was becoming a club, the Return of the Disappeared Club. If this kept up, they'd charge dues and send out newsletters. Ted debated for the umpteenth time whether to pack and get the hell out. But where to? Wasn't he already as far from the mainstream as he could be? He wasn't gonna live in an igloo on Baffin Island.

The phone rang.

"Mr. Snowe?" It was the voice of an American woman.

"Who's this?"

"The widow Brutto."

Ted didn't reply.

"Yoo-hoo. Are you there?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm not. I'm in Lisbon, at an outdoor café by this plaza on the river."

"What plaza?"

"It's humongous. They have bronze statues of guys on horseback that have pigeons standing on them."

"The Praça do Comércio," Ted said.

"How long will it take you to get here?"

"It's late."

"In the morning. No. At lunchtime, when there are people around. An outdoor café."

"How'd you get my number?"

"You're listed, dummy."

"Oh. How will I know you?"

"No. Tell me how I'll know you, how you'll stand out."

Ted thought for a moment. "I have an old Purdue T-shirt. Blackmail, huh?"

"I'm saving your life, too. One o'clock. Don't be late."

Mrs. Jimmy Knuckles Brutto hung up. Ted packed his emergency kit: cash in dollars and euros, and a change of underwear. His impulse was to bypass Lisbon and catch a plane out of Porto.

Which would accomplish diddly. If an amateur could find him in Vila Nova de Milfontes; a pro could trace him anywhere. Ted dug through his dresser for the T-shirt.

The Mercedes-Benz smelled like a shoe store. Henrique Bola sat stiffly in the back with Leo Aspromonte. Bola smelled like cologne and whatever he had been drinking. He was pudgy and had more chins than the Asp thought any man ought to have.

"It is my pleasure to welcome you at the airport and to Portugal," Bola said. "It is my pleasure to serve your people in any manner my humble talents permit."

Among numerous international enterprises, Henrique Bola exported his nation's most fabled product—vintage port wine. With assistance on the U.S. end, he did so without troubling customs and tax officials.

"I wish to locate an individual," said the Asp.

"You are positive he is in Portugal?"

The Asp fondly recalled the interrogation of Elizabeth Brutto. "I am optimistic."

They were between the airport and downtown Lisbon. Bola told the driver to stop the car and go for a walk. The driver angled into a narrow spot and eased the big sedan onto the sidewalk. After he exited and shut the door quietly, Henrique Bola said, "In *Lisboa*, you park where there is space."

The Asp told Bola what he thought he needed to know.

"Your *Senhor* Theodore Snowe is an American expatriate living in Portugal for between two to four years?"

"It is likely."

Bola said, "I cannot understand why, but Americans do not often visit Portugal, let alone resettle. Your man should not be too difficult to pinpoint. There are periodic visa requirements."

"You have immigration department connections?"

"Of course," said Bola, insulted. "A person could begin a life in *Lisboa*. If I were him, though, I would choose one of our lovely beaches, either on the Algarve on the south coast or on the Atlantic, where there are far fewer tourists."

"We appreciate your efforts," the Asp said.

"Give me four or five days."

"One or two would be better."

Henrique Bola removed a cloth-covered object from under the seat ahead of him. He unwrapped a silenced short-barrel revolver. "This may be useful to you."

The Asp held up a hand. "Thank you, no."

"Sir, if the man poses a danger—"

"Direct me to a kitchen supply store that sells quality ice picks."

A squadron of butterflies maneuvered in Beth Palmer Brutto's stomach the next day at the outdoor cafe, and it wasn't just coffee nerves. It was twenty after one and no sign of Mr. Purdue University.

Emboldened by port wine, she'd come on stronger on the phone than she knew she could deliver. Now her hangover lingered and she was not liking jet lag.

Beth started to get up and the hell out of there, the first plane out. A wiry guy with a loopy grin sat down across from her. "You come here often?"

Beth couldn't help but smile and be unafraid. She looked at this thirty-something boy next door and his Purdue Boilermakers T-shirt. This clown couldn't kill an ant. "Where were you?"

"Hanging loose for an hour. Checking you out, checking out the scene."

"How'd you know it was me?"



"You're alone and fidgety. If you're not alone, I'm in deep guano."

"Don't worry. You went to Purdue?"

Ted Snowe nodded. "Graduated in mechanical engineering."

"The basketball thing. You aren't, well, tall."

"Five-eleven and a quarter, rounded off in the press guides as six-one. I compensated for being short by being slow. Made second team All Big Ten in my junior and senior years. It went downhill from there."

"To mob hit man."

"That's not quite accurate and you know it," Ted said. "My turn to ask questions. What's a nice girl like you doing being widowed by Jimmy Knuckles?"

"Mind if I smoke?" Beth asked.

"Nope. Everyone else in Portugal does."

Beth lit up and said, "Did you really shoot Jimmy with a blowgun?"

"Astounding yet true."

"Jimmy's a moose."

"Tell me about it. I had to retrieve the dart and Jimmy, too, before he went down. Then it was one drunk walking his drunk buddy to his room. My back ached for a week."

"In the nature shows about jungle tribes, blowguns are a mile long."

"Mine's portable. It's bamboo, so metal detectors aren't a concern."

"Clever, but how come?"

"An old friend gave me the idea."

"No, I mean what you do is clever. You've done this to others, right? An article I read at the London airport made me think of you. A guy attending his mother's funeral." The non-widow Brutto had already turned the question and answer session around.

"What's your name and how'd you end up with Jimmy?" Ted asked

"Beth Palmer. I wanted to live in New York. Not to be an actress or a model. I was fascinated by the Big Apple. I was tending bar at a pretty classy joint, and in walks this gorilla and, wow, everybody is practically falling down to kiss his ring, the managers and customers alike. What was it in the dart you shot him with?"

"Synthetic curare. Tubocurarine chloride is the active ingredient extracted from the plant."

"What's curare do?"

"It's a muscle relaxant. There's a fine line. Use too much and

he's so relaxed he's dead. Use too little and I'm dead."

"How'd you perfect the dosage?"

"Practice. Minor league basketball pays lousy. I lived in bad neighborhoods. Ask no more."

"Where'd the blowgun come from?" she asked

"A curio shop. An ex-girlfriend, a chemistry teacher, gave it to me for a birthday present. She supplied the curare too."

"Jimmy," she said, shaking her head.

"Like I told him, I used a dose that'd drop a rhino."

"I'm drawing this crazy picture of you as a hit man who doesn't do what he's paid to do."

Ted signaled the waiter. "*Mais café por a senhora, faz favor. Uma bica por me.*" Ted turned back to the widow Brutto. "Two part question. How'd you find me? What's this about saving my life?"

"May I ask a personal question?"

"Please," Ted said.

"I know this sounds cuckoo, but when you're paid to kill somebody, how come you don't?"

"I don't want to hurt anyone. Does that make me abnormal?"

Beth was writing numbers on a napkin. She gave it to Ted.

"Not abnormal, but it complicated my life."

"Ninety-four thousand eight hundred and fifty bucks is my tab for your silence?"

"Jimmy's hundred grand life insurance policy the company will take out of my hide if I don't pay it back, less what I have left of it, plus estimated expenses for this trip, plus estimated cost of divorcing Jimmy, plus estimated cost of taking my maiden name back."

The waiter brought Beth's refill and a small cup of espresso for Ted, who downed it in one gulp. "Fair enough, providing there are no more demands down the road."

"Scout's honor," Beth said.

"My hotel room's a fifteen minute walk."

Beth laughed. "The last guy I went to a hotel room with was Jimmy, and you know where that got me."

Ted smiled. "You can wait in the hall. I have some cash."

"On the subject of saving your life . . ."

"I was kinda curious."

Beth summarized the manic phone call from Jimmy and the encounter outside The Pub. "Now that's a *real* hit man, if I'm not mistaken. I'll have nightmares about him and his ice pick forever. He played tic-tac-toe with it on me. He knew how to maximize pain without puncturing the skin."

Ted paid the check and led her toward Avenida de Liberdade and the Hotel Presidente.

Quickening her stride to keep up, she said, "I didn't give him your name. Jimmy's no Rhodes scholar, but if you're gonna let him see your airline luggage tag and you're listed in the phone book, maybe, you know, you're not cut out for this line of work."

Leo Aspromonte sat in the Hotel Presidente lobby, pretending to read a magazine. The Asp looked Mediterranean, like a local businessman. Henrique Bola had proven efficient beyond expectation. The photocopy of the photograph on Mr. Theodore Snowe's visa application was adequate. The Asp had imprinted to memory the visage of an aging, Midwestern big man on campus.

Snowe entered the hotel and strode to the elevator. The Asp tucked the magazine under his arm and walked behind him. The elevator was ancient and claustrophobic. It made unsettling noises. They would be a cozy twosome. When the ice pick pierced Snowe's aorta and blood drenched his bodily cavities, he would have a couple of seconds to contemplate why he died.

The elevator arrived with a metallic clunk. Snowe opened the door, oblivious to the danger at his rear.

A woman screamed "Ted!" The Asp spun and saw the impossible, the Brutto woman shrieking beside a bewildered doorman. The Asp turned back to Snowe. His line of vision filled with a forearm, then went black.

Years of basketball had honed Ted Snowe's elbows into sharp calluses. The would-be killer hit the floor like a pile of laundry. An ice pick handle poked out of a shirtsleeve.

Ted and Beth ducked into a shop on the next street to devise their next move, as the *polícia* converged at the Presidente. Ted's loose cash was in his room. He carried spare car keys in his wallet, but didn't know where the bellman kept his car.

Maybe he wasn't cut out for this line of work.

"Don't worry about your money," he told her.

"You have it under your mattress?"

He shook his head. "Nor in the freezer."

Ted held out hope that they hadn't been to his home yet. There was evidence to destroy. A roly-poly fellow in a big Mercedes arrived soon after the *polícia*, who obviously deferred to him. He helped the groggy ice pick man into the back seat.

Beth Palmer laughed until she cried. "You gave Jimmy a library card? I can't picture Jimmy in a library. I can't."

They had gone to her hotel for Beth to pack. They then caught an *expresso* coach to Sines. From Sines, they would take a local bus to Milfontes. The latter stopped at virtually every intersection. With luck, they'd arrive at nightfall.

Ted said, "Did I thank you for saving my life?"

"At least ten times," Beth said. "I said I was gonna, didn't I? I was protecting my investment. He slices and dices you, I don't get my money."

"I'm retiring," Ted said.

"Seriously?"

They'd exchanged edited life stories on the bus. "I might get a teaching certificate, teach P.E. and coach. Engineering isn't an option. The technology's passed me by."

"Let me get this straight. You pay cash to an answering service. Somebody wants you to do what they think you do, they call. You call them. You reach an agreed price. You scope the target, consult Shorty's ID guy, then you disappear them in your patented style."

"Seemed neat at the time. I couldn't play ball any longer and I didn't want to grow up. My clients liked the results. No bloated corpses washing ashore, no body parts found in landfills."

"Little did they know. You went from playing one game to another?"

"You might say so."

"Jimmy and two others are out of the closet. More to come?"

"I really don't like the trend."

Beth said, "You and I have a lot in common, you know. We accidentally got into this. We didn't have to. You could've said no to Shorty Hammerhill and I could've said no to Jimmy."

"No argument there."

Leo Aspromonte refused the hospital. He'd lost consciousness for only a moment and his double vision was clearing. Henrique Bola worried about the knot on the Asp's temple and took him to his personal physician. The Asp worried that Theodore Snowe was getting out of the country, either directly to the airport or to his home to pack first.

Bola's personal physician would write Bola a prescription for whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. The physician examined the Asp and noted that he had a lump on his head that induced his headache. He placed a cabinet full of painkillers at his patient's disposal. The Asp swallowed two aspirins.

Meanwhile, Bola posted men at Lisbon's train stations and the airport. The Asp insisted that they go to Vila Nova de Milfontes,

just the two of them. Across the Rio Tejo, southbound on the *auto-estrada*, Bola carefully probed, "This individual, he is a challenge. His crimes must be . . . significant."

The Asp looked at him.

Henrique Bola's arms erupted in a mountain range of goose bumps. He decided that further nosiness would be impolite and remained silent unless spoken to.

The Asp leaned impatiently toward Bola and read the speedometer. "I don't know metric? Are we going fast?"

Bola took the left lane and blinked his headlamps until an Alfa Romeo and a Peugeot yielded. He stood down on the accelerator. When the needle fluttered at two hundred and twenty kilometers per hour, he replied, "Yes *senhor*, extremely fast."

**B**eth was asleep on Ted's shoulder when the bus pulled into Vila Nova de Milfontes. It was dusk and the station was deserted. Ted scanned for a welcoming committee, detected none, and squeezed her hand.

"We're here?"

He kissed her lightly. "Unfortunately."

She kissed him back. "Hey, I thought we were on business."

They were the last passengers. The driver monitored disapprovingly through the mirror, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. They released each other.

Ted said, "If we're in time to avoid a housewarming party, we are."

"If we aren't?"

"I have another car around the block for emergencies."

"A getaway car. Well, I guess you're not totally hopeless."

They walked hand in hand on narrow unlined streets, Beth's bags slung over his free arm. She said, "Whitewashed houses and colorful trim. I like it. I can hear the ocean."

"I'm the second house on the left."

"Like the others, cute and cozy. How do you get along with the locals?"

"Not many year-round foreigners live in Milfontes. I've blended in. Basketball is popular in Portugal. I play in my back yard with neighborhood guys."

"Aren't you leaving yourself wide open?"

"I play a tenth as well as I'm capable, but better than them. They chalk it up to my American basketball gene."

"Are we going in?"

Ted stopped. "I left the kitchen night-light on. You should be

able to see a glow through the curtains on the left."

"I don't."

Henrique Bola was extremely uncomfortable kneeling in the dark, awaiting a violent event. He was terrified of this man. He did not want to be here.

"They are not coming," he whined. "I, personally, would hurry to the airport. My men will intercept them. Leave the matter to me. Please."

"Lower your voice," the Asp whispered. "And move closer to me. You're blocking his night-light."

"They aren't coming, sir."

"Quiet!" the Asp hissed.

"My knees hurt," Bola whimpered. "I can't crawl and I can't stand."

With the element of surprise gone, the Asp had accepted Bola's offer of the silenced revolver. He shot him twice in the chest. Although the Portuguese was annoying, it wasn't personal. It was a practicality. The fool was jeopardizing their concealment.

In retrospect, he should have done the Brutto woman too.

"Leave your popcorn popper plugged in?" Beth asked. "Three kernels popped."

"Not a chance," Ted said. "Now I see the night-light."

"No, don't. You're not going in."

"I'll go around to the back for another angle."

"No, Ted, please, forget the damn money. You won't get the jump on him again and he's as mean as a snake."

He gave her a car key. "It's red, goofy looking, the size of a desk, and has bug-eye headlamps. You can't miss it."

"I'll think about it," she muttered as Ted went through the alley.

Ted's blowgun kit was in a plastic bag under one of the large flowerpots. The rear wasn't fenced and the lot on the ocean side was overgrown with tall grass, too sandy to build on. He crept to the pot and flattened, as if diving for a loose ball. The container was thick clay, waist high, and contained a dying plant. He peered between twisted fronds to the slider door. The night-light registered through curtains like a distant star. He'd left a side window open and a breeze ruffled them.

On to the tricky part: sliding the heavy pot without drowning out the surf. Ted pushed against it, making a sandpapering noise. The pot moved slightly, not far enough to extract the plastic bag. Either the wind ruffled the curtains more or his imagination did. He wiggled

the pot. The slider opened. Ted fished out the bag. He saw a muzzle flash, heard a pop. The front of the flowerpot exploded.

Ted loaded the blowgun. On the patio, a man fired from a crouch. Another pop. Then another. Dirt flew. A bullet pinged between Ted's ankles. He heard shattering glass. As the shooter turned to look at the broken kitchen window, Ted puffed his cheeks and shot between fronds.

The intruder slapped at his neck as if at a mosquito. His last shot discharged straight down, raising sparks. His gun clattered on the pavement. Ted caught him before he hit the ground and dragged him inside. Beth followed seconds later.

"Why aren't you at the car?"

"I said I'd think about it."

"You threw a rock?"

"I was aiming at him."

"You saving my life is getting to be a habit."

Ted deposited the Asp on his couch. When their eyes fully adjusted to the dark, they saw the bloody mess on the floor.

"Oh my God! Is that our Mercedes guy?" Beth said.

"Yeah. That was a short friendship."

Beth said, "Creepy's head's lolling like the drunkest drunk I've ever had to eighty-six. How big a dose?"

"Not quite Jimmy Knuckles-sized. He's not going anywhere."

She looked at the Asp, who stared at her. "He's awake, isn't he?"

"Very much so."

"Those eyes of his freaked me out more than the ice pick. What next?"

"Let's recreate a murder." Ted went out and came back holding the barrel of the gun with a handkerchief. He laid it next to the Asp.

"The literally smoking gun," Beth said. "Does Portugal have the death penalty?"

Ted shrugged. "I hope I don't need to know."

"A hit man coming to kill a hit man for not doing his job, then killing his pal who might be a hit man himself. This is too, too weird."

Ted packed what he needed for traveling and what might be incriminating. Beth thought the Renault 4 was so ugly it was gorgeous and asked to drive. Ten minutes out of Milfontes, Ted made an anonymous call to the *policia* from a phone kiosk.

They took the highway southward and stopped at Cabo de São Vicente, the most southwesterly point of continental Europe. They walked to cliffside and watched by moonlight as waves crashed against rocks. Then they watched the blowgun, curare, and darts crash against the rocks.



In the car, Ted gave Beth ten thousand dollars in cash and twenty shares of Microsoft stock. "I made some Hotel Presidente maid's day, but I'm far from broke. We can wire transfer the remainder, however you want to handle it. The stock's a bonus."

"Thank you, sir. What are they worth?"

"Plenty."

"What are the brown spots?"

"I'll give you a hint. They belonged to Jimmy. In a way they're yours anyhow."

"Gotcha."

"You'll be going home?"

She sighed. "Yeah."

They went east along the Algarve, the southern coastline, then crossed into Spain and headed to Seville, the nearest major city. Beth kissed the Renault's fender when they abandoned it near dawn at the airport garage.

"Where can we go from here?" Beth asked.

"To Madrid. From Madrid, to anywhere in the world."

"You're retiring, huh?"

"Yep."

"What if you had a partner?"

Ted looked at her.

She grinned and pecked his cheek as they entered the terminal. "Just kidding."

"Good."

"Although Shorty's ID whiz could fix you and me up with new identities, couldn't he?"

Ted pointed at a departure screen. "There's a nine A.M. to Madrid. Home for you?"

"My mom's home worrying. She needs me. I don't have the greatest job in the world, but they treat me okay, and what you gave me will get me out of hot water temporarily. If we can't do the wire thing, I'll trust you for the rest."

"Is Grenada on the way home? Shorty would love to meet you."

"Why not? Mom and The Pub could live without me for another week or so."

They bought tickets to Madrid and walked the concourse to their gate. Beth noticed a headline at a newsstand. "I don't know Spanish, but the photo, the handcuffed guy, could he be . . . ?"

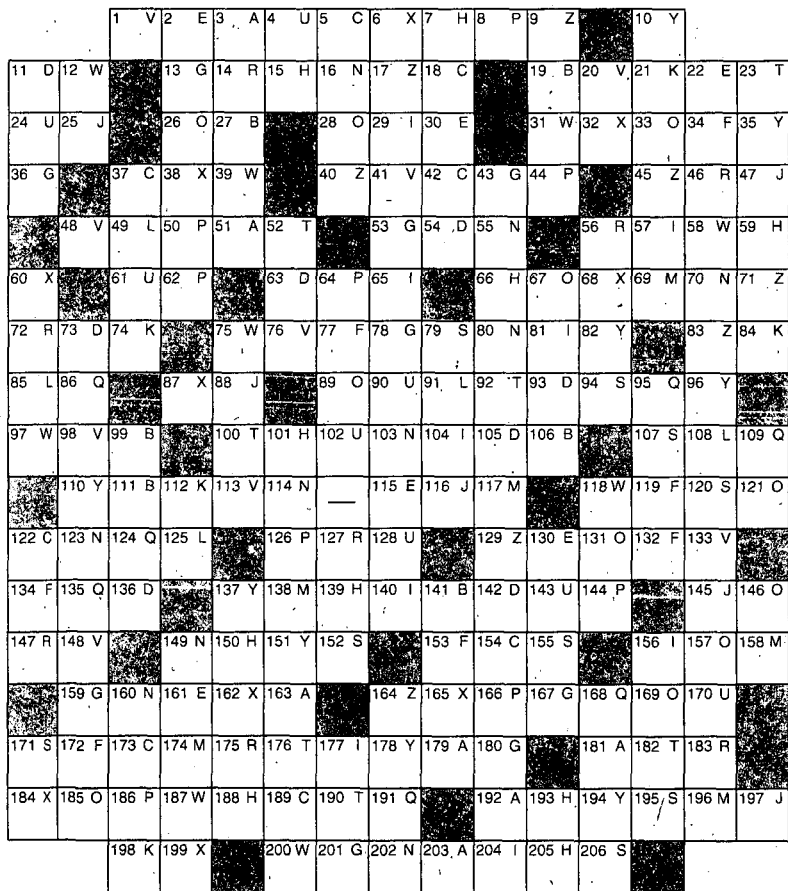
"One of mine?" Ted said, taking her hand. "I don't want to know." 🐦

# DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a quotation. The initial letters of the words in the right-hand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken. The solution will appear in the December issue. The solution to last month's puzzle is on page 108.



## DEFINITIONS

## WORDS

A. Keeps in mind

163 51 3 181 203 179 192

B. Expressed pompously	99	19	111	27	141	106			
C. Animal in Job	37	42	5	189	18	122	173	154	
D. Augmented	105	142	63	11	54	73	93	136	
E. Negligent	130	30	161	2	115	22			
F. Percussion member	153	34	132	119	134	77	172		
G. Impudence	167	43	53	78	159	201	36	13	180
H. Dismal	15	101	205	193	59	150	66	7	188
I. Legal possession	57	156	204	81	104	65	29	177	140
J. Selma, etc.	145	116	25	197	88	47			
K. Spells	84	74	112	21	198				
L. Scared, maybe	85	125	91	49	108				
M. Trump offering	69	138	117	174	196	158			
N. Stick-in-the-mud: hyph. wd.	149	70	80	103	114	123	160	16	202
O. Follower of Haile Selassie	185	89	121	28	169	33	131	157	
							26	146	67
P. Far from futile	144	62	166	186	8	126	64	50	44
Q. 1970s policy	109	95	86	168	135	191	124		
R. Like many crafts	127	46	72	56	147	175	183	14	
S. Poker-faced	120	152	195	107	171	206	79	94	155
T. 1984 King novel	176	100	92	182	190	23	52		
U. Is simpatico (with)	90	61	102	24	128	4	170	143	
V. Irving contemporary	41	133	98	113	1	76	20	48	148
W. Attention-getting ones	75	31	187	58	200	39	97	118	12
X. Hardly studied: 3 wds.	162	165	68	60	87	199	6	38	32
Y. 1913 invention	35	82	151	137	110	10	178	194	96
Z. Acted obsequiously	9	17	45	40	164	83	71	129	

# IN BOND

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R. T. LAWTON

**F**or the life of him, Theodore Oscar Alan Dewey, bail agent for the Twin Brothers Bail Bond firm, wasn't sure how to approach his employer, Clétis Johnston, even though he had now worked ten years for this very same proprietor. In the end, he decided to take a chance and for once in his life tell the complete truth. Well, at least as much as he thought he could safely get away with here in the inner sanctum, the proprietor's executive office.

"It's my cousin, sir. He's in trouble with the Feds. And I was wondering if we could go his bond?"

Not being comfortable in this asking of a favor from his boss, Theodore shifted his weight from one foot to the other as if the rich Persian carpet underneath were somehow transferring great heat from a vast furnace below. At the same time, his stubby, almost webbed fingers swiped the moisture from his pale, balding pate with a white on white silk handkerchief. He momentarily held up on further recitation of his plea as soon as the proprietor slightly lifted one freshly manicured hand from the surface of the executive desk.

"Theodore, at the time of your hiring, I distinctly remember that you had no living relatives. Except for your mother, who passed on last year. Rest her soul."

Theodore opened his mouth to reply, but paused when the proprietor raised the hand higher in a halting motion. For thirty seconds, Theodore waited in respectful silence until the palm dropped back to the desk top. He then continued.

"That's correct, Mr. Johnston. All of my close relations are long deceased, but . . ."

The proprietor leaned forward, his almost Oriental eyes seeming to grow more narrow than usual. His black, silky bandido mustache and shaved bald head glistened from the light of a baby spot overhead, while a soft gray suit of shantung silk and a stark white

shirt set off his skin, the color of freshly wet asphalt on a rain-dark night. His shiny tie was blood red.

"As I recall, Theodore, one of my hiring requirements was no relatives. Not counting your mother, you said there were no family entanglements to interrupt our work. So where does the 'but' come in?"

"It's like this, sir. Lebanese George appears to be a distant cousin on my wandering father's side. I didn't know this particular cousin even existed until a couple of years ago when

**Theodore recalled previous clients, who had somehow fallen from high places or had inadvertently gone swimming in the Pacific.**

he looked me up through my mother for the holidays. He's all the family I have left now. Is there some way we can help him?"

Cletis Johnston leaned back in his executive leather chair and tented his fingers.

"In what profession does this Lebanese George earn his money?"

"He's a wine merchant, sir. Mostly, he buys shiners from certain wineries in the valley."

"And a shiner is . . . ?"

"Oh sorry, sir. Wine that comes off a winery's bottling line without a label is what they call a shiner."

"And there is no label because . . . ?"

"Well, my cousin says the winery might plan a long aging period for the wine, a time period that could deteriorate the fancy label on a bottle. Or the wine could be intended for a private-label customer. George falls into the latter category. He buys the shiners and stores them in his In Bond Warehouse until they are labeled with his personal logo. He then pays the federal government their alcohol tax and resells the wine to various retailers."

"I follow you so far, Theodore."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now tell me about George's problem."

Theodore ducked his head.

"Actually, it's two problems, sir."

"Give me the first."

"Well, sir, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms believes that Lebanese George isn't paying the alcohol tax on the shiners like he should. So they've seized his tax bond money and also charged him with intent to defraud the government."

"Why do they think he's cheating the government?"

"Because the wine has been removed from the In Bond Warehouse and he hasn't paid the tax on it."

Cletis Johnston swiveled his shaved head toward Theodore.

"I see. And what is the second problem?"

Theodore lifted his balding head high enough to peer through his long eyelashes at the proprietor.

"Somehow, the wine just mysteriously disappeared. George has no idea how it left the warehouse premises without his knowledge."

"Ah. Now we get to the heart of the matter. Are you sure that Lebanese George isn't stealing his own wine?"

Theodore straightened himself up as much as his dumpy body would allow.

"My cousin is not a criminal. I'd bet my life on it."

The barest hint of a smile crossed the proprietor's features.

"Actually, Theodore, it is your cousin's life you're betting. You do remember how all of our other customers have fared?"

At this point, Theodore recalled those previous clients who had somehow fallen from high places, been struck by roving taxi cabs while walking outside the crosswalk, been shot by their suddenly disgruntled partners in crime, or else had inadvertently gone swimming in the deep Pacific without the proper underwater breathing apparatus. And yet, the bail firm had always made a substantial profit on having bonded the client before his demise. Or sometimes, the profit accrued shortly afterward, depending upon the business at hand. It was an innovative way of looking at the bail bond industry. Theodore shuddered inside.

"Yes sir, but I was hoping that we could go his bond and skip our usual termination of the agreement. Seeing as how he is my last living relative, I would consider it as a personal favor."

Cletis arched one eyebrow.

"You know I don't believe in pro bono publico."

"I know that, Mr. Johnston, but maybe I can work something else out."

"See that you do, Theodore, see that you do. I've never owned a winery before and the thought is intriguing. As for now, post his bond. But then, have this cousin of yours take you immediately to his warehouse. I want you to make a thorough examination of the premises and report directly back to me. Afterward, we'll see what can be done."

"Thank you, sir, I'll really work hard on this."

"I'm counting on you, Theodore. And if you think about it, your cousin is too."



By four o'clock that afternoon, Theodore Dewey had returned to the office with a small notebook crammed full of information and several hand-drawn sketches. He had his hand on the door-knob to the inner sanctum and was preparing to enter when the voice of the executive secretary, Moklal Feringheea, seated near the door, gave him pause.

"If I were you, Mr. Dewey, I would think greatly about entering before doing so," said the tall, cadaverous Hindu from behind his desk.

"What do you mean? I can go in anytime I want. I've been on an important mission for the proprietor, and he told me to report directly back to him."

"As you wish." The Hindu turned back to his desk.

Theodore hesitated.

"Why shouldn't I go in there?"

"Would you think it appropriate to interrupt your employer if he had an important telephone call?"

Theodore thought about his left little finger, the now permanently rigid one, and quickly withdrew his hand from the door-knob. After all, he only had two pinky fingers and the right one still worked fine. But as the minutes passed, a mixture of curiosity and distrust gradually overcame his fear of making a grave blunder in office etiquette. Slowly he edged closer to the rear of the executive secretary's desk in order to sneak a peek over the Hindu's shoulder at the telephone. No buttons were lit up.

"You lied to me," gasped Theodore as he pointed toward the phone. "None of the lines are busy."

Moklal rotated his head far enough to stare at Theodore.

"Are you taking into consideration that your employer also has a cell phone?"

"Oh, I'd forgotten about that."

Theodore shuffled back to a chair against the wall. On the way, he paused briefly outside the door to the inner sanctum and leaned in close to listen. No sound of voices engaged in conversation came to his ears, but then as the executive office was fairly soundproof, he couldn't be entirely sure. So he elected to wait.

An hour later, the intercom line rang on Moklal's desk. The Hindu answered promptly then punched a button to put the proprietor's voice on the loudspeaker. The proprietor sounded perturbed.

"Have you seen Theodore? I've been waiting for his report."

"Of course, Mr. Johnston, he's here. He's been sitting around the office for the last hour."



"Tell him to get in here immediately."

Theodore lunged out of his chair.

"You told me the boss was on an important phone call all this time," he hissed.

"Not so," replied the executive secretary. "I simply asked if you had considered the possibility that he might be on the telephone. You then leaped to that conclusion in your own mind."

"You tricked me."

A grim smile hovered over Moklal's face.

"As the Mahatma has said to his followers: Blaming the wolf does not help the sheep much. The sheep must learn not to fall into the clutches of the wolf."

Theodore stormed into the inner sanctum and slammed the door shut behind him.

"I was here on time, Mr. Johnston, really I was. It's just that Thuggee at the secretary's desk is playing games with me."

"Relax, Theodore. We knew that my disappeared brother sent the Hindu here for some reason of his own. Mostly I suspect it was to kill me. But since Moklal is still waiting for my twin to show up and give the final orders, I believe we have ample time to discover the entire plot. So ignore his petty ploys in the meantime. Now, what did you find out at the warehouse?"

Still struggling to calm his emotions, Theodore extracted a small notebook from the inside pocket of his plaid sport coat. He flipped the book open to the first page.

"Where would you like me to start?"

"Begin with the outside and work your way in."

"Yes, sir. George's warehouse sits on a through street inside an industrial park near the bay. Lots of truck traffic rumbling by at all hours. The streets are not well lit at night, so most businesses have their own floodlights attached to the outside walls of their buildings, if they have any lights on at all."

"What's across the street from the warehouse?"

Theodore turned to one of his pencil line sketches.

"Across the street is a large machine shop that frequently works a second shift, so it's noisy over there from about eight in the morning until two the following morning. Most of their windows are blacked out to avoid outside distraction to the workers."

"And on both sides of the warehouse?"

"To the right is an empty building with a FOR SALE sign out front. Some company in bankruptcy owns it. To the left is a paint shop that closes at five P.M. and locks up tight until the next day. A row of trees planted for privacy on both of these lots pretty well blocks

all side views of the warehouse unless you're standing right up in the tree line."

"To the rear?"

"A construction firm is using a couple of cranes to erect a three-story steel girder building out back. They're currently behind schedule, so they're working two shifts. And since the wind coming off the bay blows the construction dirt so bad, the workers put up a fifteen-foot black plastic fence to catch the dust. Those guys can't see much from the rear side without poking holes in the plastic."

Cletis Johnston nodded his head as if he'd drawn his own mental picture, therefore Theodore kept speaking.

"The warehouse itself is a new, silver metal building with a dark green metal roof, no windows, one overhead motorized warehouse door in front, and a twenty-four-hour manned guard shack just outside this door. There's a cyclone fence with razor wire on top that surrounds the entire lot and one entrance gate from the street into the compound. A huge parking area is located in the front of the lot inside the fence, so the warehouse sits back from the street a ways."

"Security lights?"

"Floodlights and security cameras mounted on each outside corner of the warehouse. I checked the videotapes. Nothing there, not so much as a stray dog moving along the outside walls or anywhere inside the fence."

"The security guard?"

Theodore consulted a different page in the notebook before answering.

"On the night of the theft, the tapes show the guard never left the shack beside the door except to let his relief shift into the compound through the locked front gate. Then the first guard left, while the relief guard stayed in the shack until the next morning when the warehouse was found empty inside."

"I assume everything had been removed."

"Yes, sir. The wine, the bottles, the packing cases, even the wooden pallets they stack the wine on. All gone. The floor was barren."

"Interesting. And that brings us to the floors of the warehouse. Proceed."

Theodore turned a page.

"Eight inches of reinforced cement. We tapped every portion of the floor with a metal rod. No hollow spots or underground passages. George and I are stumped."

"Let me think," said the proprietor. He leaned back in his executive leather chair and gazed off into the darkness of the ceiling.

As the minutes passed, Theodore's legs grew tired, his arches hurt, and there was a decided slump to his rounded shoulders. He was debating the consequences of taking a seat in some distant corner of the office when the proprietor suddenly sat up straight in his executive chair.

"Tell me, Theodore, when is another wine shipment due to be stored in the warehouse?"

"One came in today, sir. A semi unloaded a shipment of shiners while we were inspecting the warehouse. Why?"

Cletis Johnston scribbled furiously on a lined pad of yellow legal paper.

"I don't think you have much time, Theodore. It's already growing dark outside."

The proprietor tore the top sheet off the pad and thrust it into Theodore's pudgy hands.

"Here are my instructions on what you should do and specifically on what you should look for. Now be gone and take the Hindu with you."

"But, sir, me and that Thuggee don't get along at all. I'm half afraid to turn my back on him for fear he'll strangle me when I'm not looking."

"Theodore, trust me, if this is what I think it is, you'll be glad to have company with you this time. No arguments. Now go. And hurry. As for my part, I need to call my friend the precinct captain to verify a couple of my suspicions."

Theodore scurried out of the inner sanctum, but had a sinking feeling about spending the next few hours working side by side with Moklal Feringheea, the executive secretary. For the first time in his career, Theodore contemplated the wisdom of carrying a second handgun on his person. Perhaps something in a hideout, small-caliber automatic in an ankle holster. But then he had to consider how difficult it would be to balance on one leg like a stork and reach down to his ankle if he had the necessity to draw this second weapon. Somehow, life was no longer as simple as it used to be.

About three the next morning, Theodore staggered back into the executive office. The rear portion of his head was wrapped in white gauze and his left hand, the one with the permanently rigid pinky finger, was pressed lightly against the bandage. Unfortunately, the once-broken and then improperly-set little finger on that hand now stood straight up like a stubby white feather in some kind of outlandish hat designed to be worn only on the back of the head.

"I see you had some problems," said the proprietor.

"I got mugged," answered Theodore. "Somebody sneaked up behind me in the dark and bounced a blackjack off the back of my skull when I wasn't looking."

"Can't say I'm surprised. But what did you see before the lights went out?"

Before replying, Theodore shuffled over to the side wall, procured one of the padded chairs, and pulled it backward to the middle of the room. The chair's hind legs left twin drag marks against the nap in the rich Persian carpet. He set the chair in front of the proprietor's desk and plopped down onto the padded seat. When Theodore thought about it much later, he realized this was only the second time in his career with the Twin Brothers Bail Bond firm that he had been allowed to sit in the presence of the proprietor while within the inner sanctum.

For now, it took Theodore a couple of minutes to gather his wits before he could continue his telling of the evening.

"I did as you instructed, Mr. Johnston. I turned off my headlights and pulled into the lot on the right side of the warehouse. You know, the lot that was for sale. Then I parked out of sight behind their vacant building. When it got too dark to observe anything from our surveillance spot, I told Moklal to wait in the car while I went up to the fence to get a better view."

A spasm of pain wrinkled Theodore's forehead and put a frown in the corners of his mouth.

"Excuse me, sir, but do you have a couple of aspirins?"

"Story first, Theodore, pain reliever second."

"Yes, sir. Well, I was concealed in the row of trees with a great view of the back of the warehouse when I saw both cranes from the construction site in the lot behind the warehouse swing their booms over the highest point of the black plastic fence and continue above the cyclone fence topped with razor wire. On each of those booms there was a man dressed all in black riding on the hook suspended from the cable."

"I suspected as much," inserted the proprietor. "Then what?"

"The first man attached his hook to a large eye-bolt on the roof, right above the center of the back wall of the warehouse. He signaled the crane operator, and the boom lifted the back portion of the roof up in the air like somebody had opened the lid on a square can but left half the lid attached on one side."

"Quite right, Theodore. When your cousin looks closer in the morning, I think he will find that the back portion of the roof is hinged at the peak like a trapdoor. And there is probably a remote

control that the construction crew uses to activate servos that pull back bolts on the underside of the roof. Bolts that normally hold the roof latched down in the strong bay winds. But when these bolts are electrically pulled back out of the way, the crane can then lift one edge of the roof. Since the roof has been painted a dark color, and the theft takes place at night, plus there are few lights in that industrial park, this method of entry is almost indistinguishable to the casual passerby."

"But how do they get the wine out of the warehouse? I was unconscious, so I missed that part."

"Very simple, Theodore. The man on the second boom is lowered into the warehouse itself, where he runs steel cables through the wooden pallets used to store the stacked cases of wine. He then attaches these cables to the hook on the second boom. The boom pulls the load up into the air and swings the pilfered wine over to waiting trucks on the construction site."

"Pretty tricky," mused Theodore. "How did you figure all this out?"

"People seldom look over their heads to solve their problems, Theodore, but with the facts you gave me there weren't many choices left. It was a simple, straightforward solution to the problem of extracting items from a metal box. And frankly, it is the same well-thought-out type of plan I would have devised if I had been confronted with a similar situation. The hinged roof, the noisy industrial area at night, the easy explanation for cranes at a construction site all speak of a nefarious mind at work. But all this to steal a few thousand cases of wine? I fear we must delve deep below the surface of such obvious facts."

Theodore's normally bulging eyes opened even wider in surprise.

"You mean there's more to it than just stealing shiners from my cousin's warehouse."

"I'm afraid so. I had my friend the precinct captain run a background check on the construction company. Seems the company is German owned under some murky holding company in Bosnia. And strangely enough, the same construction firm recently built your cousin's In Bond Warehouse, so it was easy for them to install the hinged roof they needed for their plan."

Theodore screwed up his face in puzzlement.

"But if they didn't do it just to steal the wine, then why?"

"In our business, Theodore, I don't believe in coincidence. Remember that other bondsman that was poaching on our special bail bond clients last year?"

"You mean Herr Morden, the East German that had to leave the

Slavic countries when NATO stopped the mass killings over there?"

"Exactly, Theodore. A few months ago, we unraveled his plot to assassinate the Secretary General of the U.N. here in the Bay Area and then we exposed that plan to his enemies, the opposition party, in hopes they would eradicate our problem for us. It would appear that he survived their attempts to terminate him. Now he has returned to exact his revenge on us. He used your cousin as bait to draw us out of our stronghold where he could get at us more easily. We will have to be ever vigilant in the future to avoid his traps."

"So that's why two of his men came through the black plastic fence and bonked me in the head."

Cletis Johnston arched one eyebrow and leaned forward in his executive leather chair.

"How did you know there were two men if you were unconscious at the time and didn't see them?"

Theodore shuffled his feet and dropped his gaze.

"They're in the trunk of my personal car."

"And how did they get in there?"

Theodore mumbled a reply.

"Speak louder, Theodore, I can't understand you."

"I said, Moklal strangled both of them and dumped them in my trunk. We were lucky the police that showed up at the scene didn't search my car. Here I am with this throbbing headache, and now he says it's my job to dispose of them."

The proprietor nodded in agreement.

"You must admit the Hindu did his portion of the job. The cleanup afterward becomes your duty. Consider that he saved your life. You should be grateful."

Theodore slumped.

"I just know that Thuggee is gonna claim I owe him some kind of deep dark debt in return, like I'm his personal slave for life, or we're blood brothers, or something worse. And then he'll come up with some saying I won't understand from that Mahatma guy to go with the situation. Wait and see. I already tried giving him money, but he says it's not that kind of debt."

"Theodore, go home and call me in the morning, we have other work to do."

Halfway to the door, Theodore remembered one more concern. Very carefully, so as not to aggravate his pounding headache any more than necessary, he turned around.

"Pardon me, Mr. Johnston, but what about my cousin, Lebanese

George? We never agreed on a way he could pay the firm back for going his bond. I really don't want him to fall into the category of our special clients, yet I also know you don't do free work."

"Not to worry, Theodore. Your cousin can just pay us the same ten percent that any bondsman would charge and we will let the matter go at that."

"Very generous of you, sir."

"Not at all, Theodore, not at all. I rather suspect that Herr Morden will make another run at us in the future. But one of these days, we will ambush our sly pursuer with his own snare. Merely a question of time. Therefore, as even you can see, it now serves my purpose to leave Lebanese George out there as a stalking horse. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to be the bait?"

Theodore closed his open mouth and walked away, walked very quickly away. 🐾

### **Solution to the October "UNSOLVED"**

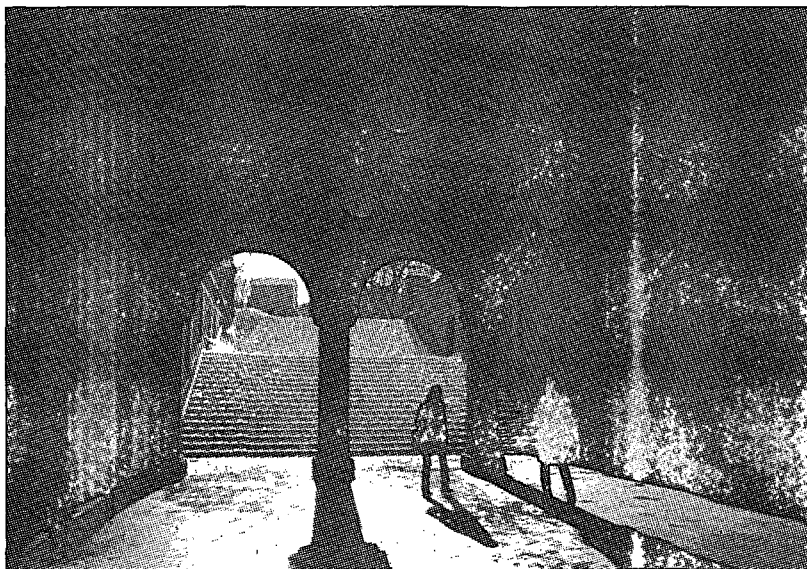
Oscar Johnson stabbed Edith Kilmer.

ARR.	COUPLE	STATE	CRIME	TIE	DRESS
Mon.	Ralph & Alice Immel	TX	dynamiter	yellow	yellow
Tue.	Norbert & Flora Garrels	SC	forgery	orange	green
Wed.	Oscar & Betty Johnson	VA	extortion	red	orange
Thu.	Peter & Cathy Holmes	UT	burglary	green	blue
Fri.	Quint & Edith Kilmer	TN	arsonist	polka dot	red
Sat.	Martin & Dora Lambert	WI	cocaine	blue	purple



# MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

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## Chance Meeting

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph  
contest will be found on page 141.

# GIFT HORSE

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PERCY SPURLARK PARKER

**B**elle Navilone had gotten me to come to her house by telling me a friend of hers had a job offer. She made the introductions when I stepped into her study.

"Trevor Oaks, Vincent Rossenburg. Vinny was one of my husband's former business associates."

He was sitting on the visitors' side of Belle's hand-carved mahogany desk and didn't bother getting up. He sat there eyeing me up and down. I couldn't tell which of the wrinkles in his face were from his age or from him frowning at me.

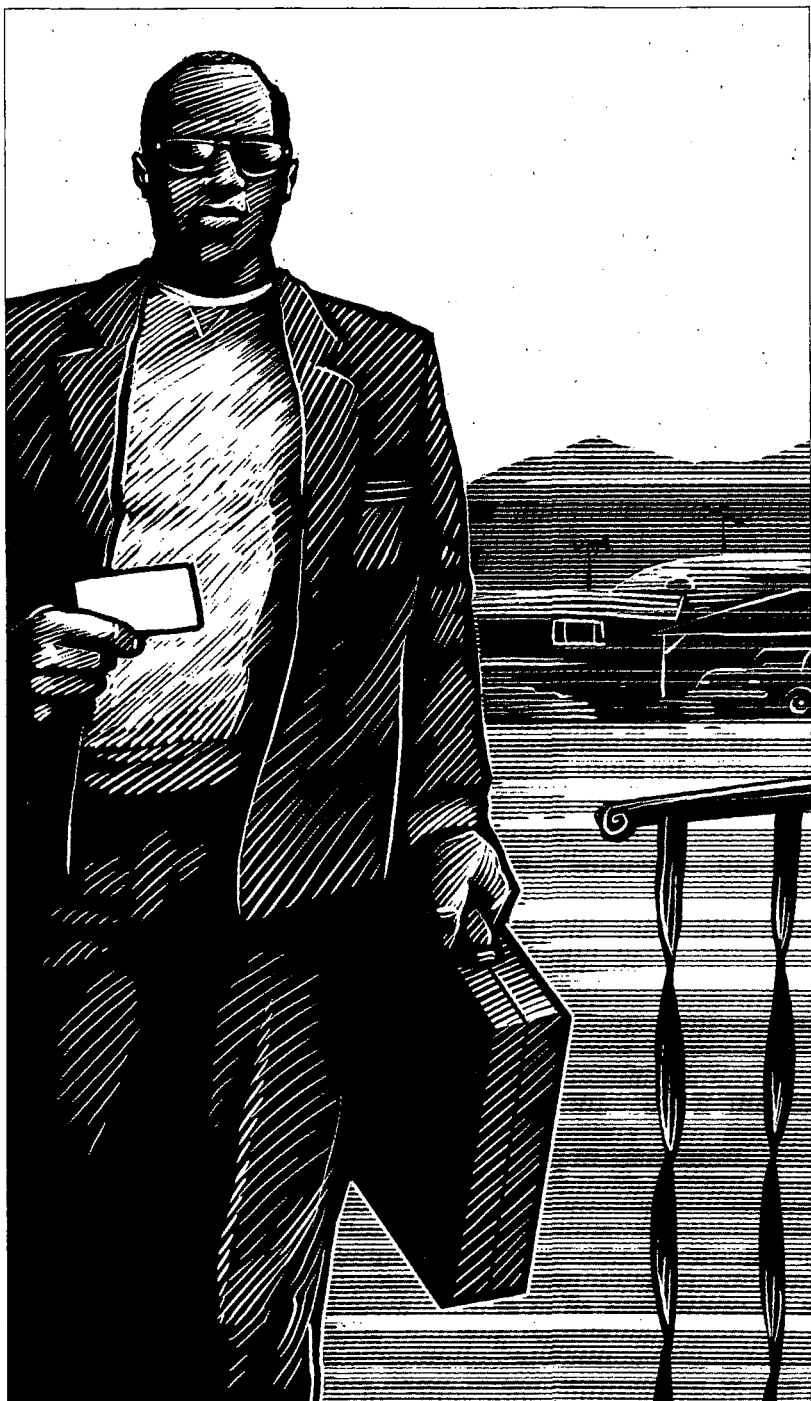
"You didn't tell me he was black, Belle."

Belle smiled from behind her desk. "Hell, you're a pretty smart fella, Vinny. I knew you'd figure it out sooner or later."

She could've explained the whole deal to me over the phone, but that wouldn't have been Belle. I have a P.I. license, and she knew I wasn't about to risk it, or myself, by doing anything stupid or illegal. Knowing this about her, and since I hadn't been tied up with anything else, I had come right over.

I took the chair opposite Vinny as he continued to frown at me. I guessed he was as old as Belle's seventy or so years, but he showed it a hell of a lot more. And even though he was sitting, I'd say he was almost as tall as my six-four. But whereas I have a lot of heft and muscle, he had a lot of skin and bone. Thin, stringy white hair covered his narrow scalp. He had a bump for a nose and thick, bushy eyebrows that hung over pale gray and baggy eyes.

Belle, on the other hand, was her usual elegant self. Old Vegas, old money, mob money, it kind of all meant the same, especially in her case. Her husband had been one of the mob's big boys when the mob began to lose the hold it had on the casinos and the corporations started coming in. The Feds had a hand in it. Ned Navilone was due to come before a grand jury when he took a ride



out in the desert and sucked on the barrel of his .45. Or at least that's the way the story went. No one had ever been able to prove anything different.

She didn't have a strand of hair out of place, her makeup was perfect, her nails exquisitely sculptured and polished, and diamonds adorned every finger. She was a tough old bird who was used to giving orders and having them obeyed. I'd kind of gotten to like her anyway, something I wouldn't dare tell her.

Princess Gloria sat in her lap, a silver white ball of purring fur. The cat had been the reason Belle and I first met. Her nephew's ex-wife had hired me to find the cat, but the case hadn't been that simple. Before it was over it had cost the lives of both the nephew and the ex-wife. But on the upside, it had saved Belle's granddaughter from possibly the same fate.

"I don't know, Belle. You sure he can handle this?" Vinny grumbled.

"I said he could," Belle told him, stroking Princess Gloria. "Now let's get our heads together on this thing."

Vinny grumbled a little more, sneered, adjusted himself in his chair. I straightened some myself.

"Now then," Belle said. "Vinny, you wanted someone trustworthy enough to carry out this little errand of yours, well, here he is. I don't know anyone I'd consider more trustworthy. And he's big and ugly enough not to let anyone or anything get in his way of carrying out a job he's agreed to do."

"Thanks for the glowing endorsement, Belle. Think I'll have to put that on my business cards."

"You do, and you'll owe me royalties."

Our patter didn't help Vinny get rid of his frown; the left corner of his mouth still held a tight curl.

"Well, Vinny, either offer the man the job, or do the damn thing yourself."

"I don't know, Belle. You really sure about this guy?" Vinny asked, looking across the desk to her.

"How many ways you want me to tell you," she answered. Then to me, "Vinny has never been a very decisive person. Sorry I got you out here for this runaround, Trevor. If you leave now, I'll owe you dinner sometime."

"Alright, alright," Vinny said, holding up one hand. "Just don't rush me, okay. This is important to me."

There was a briefcase by his chair. He took a deep breath, bent down to pick it up, and handed it to me.

"Open it."

I flipped the clasp and lifted the lid. Packs of hundred dollar

bills lay jumbled inside. Some old bills, some new.

"There's sixteen packets in there," Vinny said. "Ten grand each. One of them is yours." He shrugged. "Payment in advance for doing the job."

My first reaction was to take the money and stick it in my pocket. I don't get offered ten thousand dollars every day. But the temptation only lasted a few seconds. I sat the briefcase on Belle's desk. "I think I'd better hear what this job is first."

"It's really a piece of cake, Trevor," Belle said. "Hell, for ten grand I ought to do the damn thing myself."

I sat back in my chair and waited for Vinny to speak. It took him a moment.

"I got a daughter in this town I haven't been much of a father to," he started. "Truth is, I haven't been a father to her at all. Her mother and me had some good times back when this town was run right. Beth was my main lady out here. I still had my wife and kids back in Detroit. But hell, back in those days, all us guys had a little something on the side." He stopped sharply, looking over to Belle. "That's not to say that Ned . . ."

"There's nothing you can say about my husband I don't already know, Vinny. That's old hat, move on."

Maybe Princess Gloria thought she was talking to her. She jumped out of Belle's lap and disappeared behind the desk.

"Yeah, well, anyway," Vinny started. "When the Feds started cracking down I went back to Detroit. I heard Beth was pregnant. I figured that's the breaks. She should've known better. I had my family back in Detroit to think about. I got some money together for her anyway, doctor bills and such. She was a hard-nosed dame and she was pissed at me for leaving her. She sent the money back telling me exactly what I could do with it. I guess I felt some relief back then. If that's the way she wanted it, fine. I'd tried to do the right thing and she'd turned me down. My hands were clean."

"So far, I still don't figure where I come in."

"My family back in Detroit's all grown up now, on their own. Wife died almost five years ago. I'm more or less retired." Another slight shrug. "You get older. You reflect on the decisions you've made in your life. . . ."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Vinny," Belle barked. "Get on with it. His doctor's given him six months at the most."

Vinny took a deep breath, nodding. "Yeah, that too." He paused. "I heard Beth died about a year or so ago. Not that I wanted to get back with her or anything. But, well, you know debts are owed. I

can't do anything for her, but I'd like to try and make things right for our daughter. Mavis is her name. The hundred and fifty G's are for her. I need you to deliver it to her and make sure she knows there're no strings attached. It's hers free and clear. But I don't want you to tell her it's from me."

"How the hell am I supposed to do that? You might as well just go by and drop it on her doorstep."

"That won't do either, Oaks. You've got to make sure you put the money in her hands. She has to know it's all hers. No strings."

"But not from you?"

"Right. If she finds out it's from me, she might be as stubborn as her mother and throw it back in my face."

"She'd have to be pretty stubborn to toss that kind of money away."

Vinny smiled. "Her mother was something in her day."

"Look, if I can't tell her it's from you, who am I supposed to tell her it's from?"

"That's for you to figure out. I told Belle what I wanted, and she picked you. Can you handle the job or not?"

For ten grand it was worth a try. "Yeah, I can handle it," I said, not having any idea how I was going to go about it. Dropping a load of cash into someone's lap sounded easy enough until you really start thinking about it. I couldn't think of anyone who wouldn't want a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. But I couldn't think of anyone who wouldn't be looking for the strings either.

"How do your other children feel about this?"

Vinny nodded. "They're okay with it. My oldest daughter, Sheila, tried to talk me out of it, but she knows how important this is to me. She and her husband even made the trip out here with me. I was going to come alone but Sheila wouldn't hear of it. Hard-headed kid mothers me more than my wife did."

"You've got an address, or is finding her part of the job?"

"She's in the phone book."

I took one of the packs of hundreds out of the briefcase and stuck it into my pocket, then snapped the case shut. "Who do I report to once the job's done?"

"Belle," Vinny said. "She'll get back to me."

"And if by some chance Mavis won't take the money?"

"Bring it back to Belle, along with half of that packet you stuck in your pocket."

"That's clear enough," I said, standing. "I'll do my best."





There was only one Mavis Zoller in the phone book, Zoller being her mother's last name. She had an apartment in a complex on Buffalo just off of Alta.

It was just after five P.M., drive time traffic was beginning to pile up. But Vegas is a twenty-four-hour town with most of its work force on a swing shift. So I had as much chance of finding Mavis Zoller at home now as any other time in the day.

Desert Flower Apartments, like most of the apartment complexes out here, is a collection of three-story white stucco buildings with rust-colored shingles of one hue or another. Mavis Zoller's apartment was on the third floor of building K. It took me two trips around the complex before I found building K, but only a couple of firm knocks on the door before someone answered.

She cracked the door slightly, the thick burglar chain only allowing one gray eye and a sliver of her face to show.

"Mavis Zoller?" I asked, passing her one of my business cards.

"Private investigations," she said, more to herself as she read the card, then looked up at me. "What do you want?"

"Just a few minutes of your time. If I could just come in."

"Well, uh, I don't know . . . I'm very busy right now."

I unsnapped the briefcase and opened it so she had a good view of the contents.

The gray eye got bigger. "Is that real?"

"Yeah, and it's all yours."

The door closed and opened so quickly I didn't hear the chain sliding off its hook. She was wearing a simple blouse and dark skirt. Nothing to accent her figure, but nothing to hide it either.

It was a one-bedroom apartment. The living room flowed into the small dining area, which flowed into the tiny kitchen. Tiled kitchen, dark blue carpet everywhere else. We sat at the small dining table; I sat the open briefcase on the table between us.

"You said this is mine? I don't understand."

I could see the family resemblance in the general shape of her face, the gray eyes, and the bump of a nose. Aside from that, or in spite of, she was a good-looking woman. Her dark brown hair was cut short with a thick lock that toyed with her forehead. Being able to appraise both eyes together was a treat. They were wide and bright, the gray lighter than it had first seemed at the door. Her lips were full, yet not overpowering.

"How? Why?" she said, hesitating as she touched the money.

"A gift from a friend," I said. I'd thought of a dozen different



responses to the question I knew she would ask. This one seemed as good as any.

"I . . . I don't understand."

"There's not much more I can tell you. You have a benefactor who wants to remain anonymous. The money's yours to do whatever you wish. I imagine if you use it properly, you can just about set yourself up for life. Or a damn good part of it, anyway."

Her eyes began to water, as her smile grew larger. She shook her head. "I don't know what to say. Who would do this for me? I can't believe it." Then she laughed out loud. "I guess I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, should I?"

It'd been a long time since I'd heard that expression, but it was right on target. "You know, I don't have any release forms for you to sign or anything. But I guess before I officially turn the money over to you, I should see some identification."

I didn't doubt she was Mavis Zoller, but there was nothing wrong with making sure. After all, I was handing over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

"What? Oh yeah, right."

She got up and went over to the coffee table in front of the sofa, retrieved the black leather purse that was lying there. She reseated herself, fumbling through the purse.

"Here," she said, handing me her Nevada drivers' license.

She was wearing a white turtleneck sweater, and she looked like she was working up a smile when the picture was taken. It really didn't do her justice, but then they never do. The D.M.V. wasn't a photo studio.

I handed the license back to her. "Enjoy your money, Ms. Zoller."

She squealed, hunching her shoulders slightly. "It's got to be my earrings." They were clip-on buttons with a single penny attached to each. "A friend gave them to me for luck. Today's the first day I wore them." She pulled the briefcase closer to her. "I've never seen this much money before. What am I suppose to do now?"

"I'd thank your friend for the earrings first."

She nodded. "Yes, I could do that," she said, grabbing packets of money. "I could clear up all my bills. I could use a new car too. You ought to see that piece of junk I've been driving. And I saw this great outfit . . ." She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hands, still holding onto packets of hundred dollar bills. She stood, took a couple steps away from the table, and then came back. She made a motion toward the briefcase, drawing back as though she was unable to let go of the money. She finally

dropped the packets back on top of the others, and went to the corner of the living room by the sofa where a small bar sat. When she returned to the dining table she was carrying a two-liter bottle of vodka and two glasses. "Do you need ice? I usually drink mine without."

She splashed vodka in both glasses without giving me a chance to answer. And again without waiting, drained her glass before I even reached for mine.

"Wow. I needed that." She poured herself another. "I never had anything come close to happening to me like this before." She almost emptied her glass a second time. "What should I do? What would you do?"

I took a sip of my drink. It was a hell of a question. I'd never had that much money of my own staring at me at one time either. "Well, it's pretty hard to make a killing out here without the IRS being there to get their cut. I guess I'd try to find somebody who's knowledgeable in tax shelters. I wouldn't rush it, though; maybe check two or three different people out. In the meantime, I'd dump the money in the bank. A safe deposit box wouldn't be a bad idea. They might ask too many questions if you stuck that much cash in a checking or savings account."

She nodded, the smile a permanent fixture on her face now.

"If you want, I can go to the bank with you. That's a lot of money you've got there."

She poured more vodka on top of the residue from her second drink. "No, no thanks. I've got some people who can help me with that."

"You sure?"

"Yes, positive. I'll be alright."

She thanked me again. My job was done so there was no need for me to hang around any longer. I wished her luck and left without finishing my drink. Vodka had never been a strong favorite of mine. Crown Royal, that would've been a different story.

**M**iller's Game Room is located just north of the Stratosphere on Las Vegas Boulevard. Gus Miller, a client who became a very good friend, willed the place to me and I never bothered to change the name. I have living quarters on the second floor. The first floor houses arcade games and the small cubicle I call an office, where I deal with the business of the Game Room, and Oaks Investigations.

We get mostly regulars in the Game Room, where competition

is the word of the day, whether among themselves or against the various games. From the back entrance I can go up to my apartment or directly into the Game Room itself, which is what I did. The place is never quiet—there's the animated noise from the games, the chatter of the players bragging to each other or cursing the games themselves.

Stevie, one of my part-timers, was behind the counter.

"Any calls?"

"Naw, hasn't rung once," he said, smoothing down what few strands he had left on his balding dome. He didn't need the job. He was a retired Army colonel and only worked here to help fill his days and keep himself out of the casinos. "Carl was acting his crazy ass self, though. I thought I was gonna have to toss him."

I looked around the place. The football and basketball games were getting the most play. A couple of people were sitting with tight grips on their steering wheels as the video screen took them through a number of sharp curves.

"He left already, vowing as usual to never come back."

"Until next time."

Stevie's nod was accompanied with a big grin. "You got it."

I made my way back to my office, flopped down behind my desk. The place barely has enough room for breathing space. There's a small safe behind the desk that I bump into constantly. Two chairs on the other side of the desk and a filing cabinet against the wall behind them. I keep saying I'm going to enlarge the place, but the only change I've made is to add a few photos from my UNLV days.

I was going to be the next great offensive end. But I screwed up my right knee in my junior year. So much for the football career I'd worked most of my life for. Bitter? Yeah, I wasn't the nicest person back then. The knee still acts up every now and then, mostly when it rains. Some days I have a limp, some days I don't.

I locked the fee I'd gotten from Vinny in the safe and dialed Belle's number. She answered the phone herself.

"All done," I said.

"Did you have any trouble?"

"As a matter of fact, it went smoother than I'd thought."

"I guess it would be difficult to turn down that much money."

"Thanks for thinking of me."

"You were an easy choice, Trevor. I meant what I said to Vinny."

"Well, I thank you again, and my bank account thanks you. Speaking of that, I know you've got all the money in the world,

but I did get ten grand out of this. I feel I owe you a referral fee or something."

"Not at all. You did an important job for a man who was willing to pay you for it. He felt the job was worth ten thousand dollars, so be it. Besides, this way I can keep you in my debt."

She said it with a lot of laughter in her voice, but I knew if Belle needed me to do something for her, she wouldn't hesitate to remind me of Vinny and my ten grand payday.

"There was an old TV show where this guy gave a million dollars to someone every week. Half the time he screwed up their lives," Belle mused. "It's only a hundred and fifty thousand, I know, but what'd you think? This a good thing for her?"

I couldn't recall the show Belle was talking about, but I'd thought about the question she'd posed. "I don't know, Belle. She was excited about having all that cash handed to her. If she takes her time, maybe . . ."

"Yeah, you've done what you were paid to do. It's up to her now."

I ended the conversation by thanking her again, then spent a few minutes shuffling papers on my desk before going back up front.

I rubbed elbows with the folks in the joint for a while. I watched Marty D. beat out his cousin Marty K. with a last second field goal. And I was part of the crowd who cheered on a newcomer, a cute blonde somewhere in her early twenties, as she racked up almost five hundred thousand points on *Invaders From Space*.

Joe Lynne called and said she was quitting, so Stevie offered to hang in until closing if I would run up to Big Mama's for some ribs. It was an easy bargain, I was getting hungry myself. I wound up taking rib orders for a half dozen folks in the Game Room. Big Mama's had been closer when it was next door to MGM. They'd relocated a few years back, taking over a closed McDonald's on Bonanza near Rancho. But now with the way the traffic can get on the Strip sometimes, I generally make it up to their new place and back in three-quarters of the time.

Carl made it back in just before closing, cursed the *Vengeful Warrior's* game when he couldn't get to the fourth level, and stormed out again.

I wasn't ready to turn in after we closed; I needed my recreational time just like the next guy. The Strip is made to dazzle the tourists, to get their hearts thumping, their blood racing, and their money flowing. The multicolored lights on the hotel marquees beckon to one and all. From the dancing clown at Circus

Circus, to the volcano at the Mirage, to the lion at MGM and beyond, it's all here. I'll admit I get wrapped up in it like most everybody else.

I hadn't been in the Luxor for a while, so I decided to check it out. I dropped a hundred at one of the blackjack tables, went up a hundred and eighty shooting craps. If there's one adage that's true about gambling, it's knowing when to stop. I got a table in the lounge, ordered a beer, and settled back to listen to one of the established quartets in town dish out some smooth jazz.

I was working on my second beer when Paula came into the lounge. She's a real estate agent with offices on Sunset. In heels she's almost six feet tall, but her bra size and hip measurement prevent anyone from describing her as willowy. She waved, and my evening, which really hadn't been all that bad, just got a whole hell of a lot better.

It was a little after ten when I made it back to the Game Room. I wasn't exactly humming show tunes, but I was feeling pretty damn good. There wasn't so much as a tingle in my knee. Considering the athleticism of last night, it was saying a lot.

About half the games in the joint were occupied, the oohs and aahs of the patrons in unison with the whiz and bangs of the games themselves. A couple of the players looked up long enough to nod hello and it was back to business.

Holly Warrington, my only full-timer, was standing behind the counter, a *Review-Journal* on the countertop in front of her. She's the only one of Gus's employees who's still here. Long thin dreds framed her dark, high-cheekboned face. She was seven years older than myself, had a showgirl's figure, and a husband she was totally devoted to.

"Afternoon," she said with a wide smile. "Turn your cell off again?"

I shrugged. "Hey, sometimes I need a little privacy. And it's way before noon."

"Tell Mrs. Navilone that. She's been calling about every twenty minutes."

"She say why?"

"Nope, just that she needs to get in touch with you."

Was my good fortune still climbing? Was it possible she had another job for me that offered a big payday?

"She's dead," was the first thing Belle said when I phoned from my office.

I sat up straighter, pressing the receiver closer to my ear. Maybe she was going to start laughing, the joke was on me,

damn she got me this time.

"How? What happened?"

"There was a fire in her apartment last night. She was found in bed. Fell asleep smoking, the papers said."

"Vinny know?"

"I'm not sure. He hasn't tried to contact me, and I didn't want to call him until I heard from you."

"Okay. Uh . . . let me get on it, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

I went back up front, got the *Review-Journal* from Holly, and scanned through it until I came across the small article on page four. It didn't say much—one victim, fire contained to the bedroom. It appeared to be caused by smoking in bed. The fire department spokesman was quoted as saying alcohol may have been involved. I put the paper down thinking about Mavis and that large bottle of vodka.

I got up to my apartment, took a quick shower, and put on some fresh clothes. The city morgue and the Clark County Coroner's office share the same one-story building on Pinto Lane. It's practically in my back yard. That is, if my back yard were about eight blocks long, hooked north, and wasn't dissected by Interstate 15.

Dr. Mitchell Foote was just coming out of the break room with a cup of coffee in his hand when I got there. He's one of the newer assistant coroners on staff. He's fair skinned and clean shaven—both face and head.

"Trevor," he said, with the straight line and plump cheeks that passes as his smile. "What brings you here today?"

"Burn victim from last night."

He nodded. "The Zoller woman."

"Someone make a positive ID?"

"Not yet. The tag is tentative." He shrugged. "But the fire was in Mavis Zoller's apartment, and the victim was the only one found there. You know her?"

"I met her yesterday."

"You'd do us a favor if you could ID her, not that it's going to be easy."

I said I'd try and he led me to the back room where the refrigerator units were and pulled out one of the waist-high drawers. The chill of the cold air wafted up to me, accompanied by a strong burnt smell.

"Prepare yourself," he said, and pulled the sheet back to the top of her shoulders.

A lump of charcoal shaped like a face was the best description I could come up with. I tried to put Mavis's face, so alive with wonderment, on the lump lying on the slab in front of me. I couldn't. But I couldn't say it wasn't her either. Fire can be pretty devastating at times. Identification can range from days, to weeks, to never. Long strands of hair, where there was hair, was tangled and matted in flakes of ash.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to a clump by her neck.

"Good ol' U.S. currency," Mitch said, taking a pair of tweezers out of his pocket and fishing into the clump. "Looks like the corner of a hundred dollar bill. The body's covered with it. Make any sense to you?"

Naturally it did, but it was nothing I could tell him right now.

"Papers said something about alcohol?"

He nodded. "Yeah, vodka I believe. Broken bottle was found near the body. I figure that was the accelerant." He took a breath. "Well, what about it? Is this Mavis Zoller?"

I tried putting the face on the lump again, but it wasn't working. Then I noticed something else. They were duller than yesterday, the fire had taken their luster, changed their shape somewhat, but they were there, the button penny earrings.

"No," I heard myself say. "Sorry, Mitch, you've got to find somebody else. I just can't be sure."

"It was her all right," I said.

I was back at Belle's, in her study. She was in her usual commanding spot behind her huge desk, Princess Gloria once more in her lap. Vinny and I, as before, were on the other side of the desk sitting across from each other.

"Just what the hell happened, Trevor?"

"I don't know for sure, but it looks like a combination of too much booze and a lit cigarette." Mitch had laid it out for me at the morgue; it was just a matter of putting it together. "Looks like she was celebrating. The old dream of dumping a bunch of cash on the bed and rolling around in it. That's the way it must've happened. Only she was smoking and drinking. She either passed out or fell asleep. The money caught fire, the booze helped spread it."

"I don't believe it," Vinny said loudly.

I guess Princess Gloria didn't want any part of the conversation—she meowed and jumped from Belle's lap.

Vinny wiped a hand over his face, shook his head. "It can't be her. It's got to be someone else."



"I wish I could say I wasn't sure. I just left the coroner's office. The facts of what happened are all there. And the woman I gave the money to yesterday was definitely your daughter, there was no mistaking the family resemblance."

Vinny's hard stare was fixed on me; his lower lip trembled slightly. "You're either mistaken or you're lying, Oaks."

"I've got no reason to lie to you."

"Like hell you don't. I'd say you've got a hundred and fifty thousand reasons."

Okay, so I knew he was upset. I knew there were a lot of things in his world going wrong for him right now. But that didn't make his accusation sit any better with me.

I was about to snap back at him, but Belle beat me to it. "That's totally uncalled for, Vinny. You've dealt with too many untrustworthy scumbags in your life. Trevor's not one of them."

He turned his gaze on Belle. "Uncalled for? My daughter's dead and the money's gone." He was breathing hard, his face reddening.

"The money got burnt up with her," I said.

"Sure, sure," he nodded.

"The evidence is at the morgue. I can take you there if you want."

"Yeah, right." Beads of sweat were sprouting on his forehead. I wondered for a split second if he was having a stroke. Then he shouted, "We'll go to the morgue all right, you lying son of a bitch. . . ."

He half rose as he jammed his hand inside his suit coat. I was faster and a hell of a lot stronger. I clamped down on the hand as he came out with a snub-nosed .38; a hard twist and the gun was in my hand. He swung at me and missed. I could've swung myself, but instead I gave him a hard push back onto his chair.

He groaned as he and the chair almost tipped over and he struggled to right himself. He got the chair steady and came at me again.

"That's enough of this nonsense, Vinny," Belle shouted, jumping to her feet and attempting to grab Vinny from across her desk.

Her arms were too short, but he stopped anyway, crumpled back onto his chair, his hands to his face.

Belle's sudden movement caused a lock of hair to fall out of place. She reseated herself, brushing the hair back in place with her left hand. She took a breath. "Now that's better. Vinny, I told you I have complete confidence in Trevor. This has all got to be a terrible accident."

"I'm not so sure anymore, Belle," I said, emptying Vinny's revolver and placing it and the shells on her desk.

Vinny looked up from his hands, his heavy brows knotting over watery eyes.

"What are you saying, Trevor?"

Belle's little repair job to her hair had kicked it off for me. I sat there thinking it through while Belle and Vinny stared at me. I hadn't noticed it when I was at the morgue. It was right there for me to see but it had gotten by me.

Mavis Zoller was dead. She was occupying that cold refrigerated drawer at the Clark County Coroner's office. But it wasn't the same woman I'd given the money to.

"Vinny, you said your daughter made the trip out here with you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, Sheila and her husband."

"Where are they now?"

He straightened up somewhat. "Something came up, they had to get back to Detroit. Left about two hours ago, why?"

"You said she agreed with you giving all that money to your illegitimate daughter?"

He nodded very slowly as it sunk in where I was going.

"But not at first . . . ?"

"No. Sheila didn't do this. You can't turn this around on her."

"I gave the money to your daughter, Vinny. She looked too much like you not to be yours. The question is, which daughter did I give it to?"

"You're way off track here, Oaks."

"I don't think so. You look like a proud father, Vinny. You got a picture of Sheila in your wallet?"

He sat back. "No, no I don't."

"Damn it, Vinny," Belle said. "You were showing me pictures of your family yesterday before Trevor got here."

He cursed to himself, made two moves toward his back pocket before he actually dug his wallet out.

Some of the photos were old and fading. There was one of a much younger Vinny in a tux with his bride on their wedding day. There was another one of a girl and a boy, both under five or six, I'd say, with an infant in a pink blanket between them. I didn't take my time going through the photos, I didn't have to. I recognized her right away. She was wearing a graduation gown, holding a large bouquet of flowers, and just like yesterday her hair was fashioned in a short cut style.

The woman in the morgue had long hair. Belle messing with her hair had reminded me of that one little fact I'd overlooked.

"This is the woman I gave the money to, Vinny. I'm guessing

your son-in-law was in the bedroom with Mavis while I was there. I don't believe Sheila could've handled it all by herself, but we'll find out."

The whole thing had been staged to make it look like the conclusion that the firemen on the scene, the coroner, and I jumped to. It could've worked, too, if no one raised a fuss, or the coroner didn't get too nosy. And what if the question of foul play was raised? Well then so what, I would be the one the cops would logically want to question.

I reached across Belle's desk for her phone. If Metro hurried, they could put a call in to Detroit and have a homicide team meet Sheila and hubby when they deplaned. I couldn't imagine her burning up the whole hundred and fifty thousand—just enough money to spread around the body to make it look that way. Having the remainder of the money in their luggage would go a long way in proving their guilt. And with me identifying the right daughter, the state's attorney should have an easy case.

As I started to dial, Vinny buried his face back into his hands, slowly shaking his head back and forth.

Princess Gloria, maybe figuring everything had settled down, jumped back onto Belle's lap again, rubbing herself against Belle's stomach until Belle began scratching her behind her ear.

Only if life could be that simple, I thought, as the phone at Metro began to ring. *A*

## SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

the gold bug  
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

From "The Gold Bug" (1843)

—Edgar Allan Poe

I have said enough to convince you that ciphers of this nature are readily soluble, and give you some insight into the rationale of their development.

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

JACQUES FUTRELLE

# THE PROBLEM OF THE DESERTED HOUSE

**T**he telephone bell rang sharply, twice. Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen—The Thinking Machine—opened his eyes from a sound sleep, rose from the bed, turned on an electric light, and squinted at the clock on the table. It was just half-past one; he had been asleep for only a little more than an hour. He slid his small feet into a pair of soft slippers and went to the telephone.

"Hello!" he called irritably.

"Is that Professor Van Dusen?" came the answer in a man's voice—a voice tense with nervous excitement, and so quick in enunciation that the words tumbled over one another.

"Yes," replied the scientist. "What is it?"

"It's a matter of life and death!" came the hurried response in the same hasty tone. "Can you come at once and——" The instrument buzzed and sputtered incoherently, and the remainder of the question was lost.

For an instant The Thinking Machine listened intently, seeking to interpret the interruption; then the sputtering ceased and the wire was silent. "Who is this talking?" he demanded.

The answer was almost a shout; it was as if the speaker was strangling, and the words came explosively, with a distinct effort. "My name is——"

And that was all. The voice was swallowed up suddenly in the deafening crack of an explosion of some sort—a pistol shot! Involuntarily The Thinking Machine dodged. The receiver sang shrilly in his ear, and the transmitter vibrated audibly; then the instrument was mute again—the connection was broken.

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"Hello, hello!" the scientist called again and again; but there was no answer. He moved the hook up and down several times to attract Central's attention. But that brought no response. Whatever had happened had at least temporarily rendered his own line lifeless. "Dear me! Dear me!" he grumbled petulantly. "Most extraordinary!"

For a time he stood thoughtfully staring at the instrument; then went over and sat down on the edge of the bed. Sleep was banished now. Here was a problem, and a strange one! Every faculty of his wonderful brain was concentrated upon it. The minutes sped on as he sat there turning it all over in his mind, analyzing it, regarding it from every possible viewpoint, while tiny wrinkles were growing in the enormous brow. Finally he concluded to try the telephone again. Perhaps it had only been momentarily deadened by the shock. He returned to the instrument and picked up the receiver. The rhythmic buzz of the wire told him instantly that the line was working. Central answered promptly.

"Can you tell me the number which was just connected with this?" he inquired. "We were interrupted."

"I'll see if I can get it," was the reply.

"It's of the utmost importance," he went on to explain tersely; "a matter of life and death, even."

"I'll do what I can," Central assured him; "but there is no record of the calls, you know, and there may have been fifty in the last ten or fifteen minutes, and of course the operators don't remember them." She obligingly gave him a quarter of an hour as she sought some clue to the number.

The Thinking Machine waited patiently for the report, staring dumbly at the transmitter meanwhile, and at last it came. No one remembered the number; there was no record of it. Central was sorry. With a curt word of thanks the scientist called for one of the big newspaper offices and asked for Hutchinson Hatch, reporter.

"Mr. Hatch isn't in," came the response.

"Do you know where he is?" queried the scientist, and there was a shadow of anxiety in the perpetually irritated voice.

"No; home, I suppose."

The man of science drew a long, quick breath—it might have been one of uneasiness—and called the newspaperman's home number. Of course the mysterious message over the telephone had not been from Hatch. It was not the reporter's voice; he was positive of that, and yet there was the bare chance that—

"Hello!" Hatch growled amiably but sleepily over the wire.

The Thinking Machine's drawn face showed a vague relief as he recognized the tone. "That you, Mr. Hatch?" he asked.

"Yes."

"In any trouble?"

"Trouble?" repeated the reporter in evident surprise. "No. Who is this?"

"Van Dusen," was the response. "Good night."

Mechanically, unconsciously almost, The Thinking Machine began dressing. The ever active, resourceful brain, plunged so suddenly into this maze of mystery, was fully awake now and was groping through the fog of possibilities and conjecture, feeling for some starting point in this singular problem which had been thrust upon it so strangely. And evidently at last there came some inspiration; for the eminent scientist started hurriedly out the front door into the night, pausing on the steps to remember that in his haste he had forgotten to exchange his slippers for shoes, and that he was bare headed.

Fifteen minutes later the night operator in chief at the branch telephone exchange was favored with a personal call from Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen. There was a conference of five minutes or so, after which the scientist was led back through the operating room and ushered into a long high-ceilinged apartment where thousands of telephone wires were centered—a web woven of thin strands, each of which led ultimately to the long table where a dozen or more girls were on watch. He went into that room at five minutes of two o'clock; he came out at seventeen minutes after four and appeared before the night operator in the outer office.

"I found it," he announced shortly. "Please, now, let me speak to police headquarters—either Detective Mallory or Detective Cunningham."

Detective Cunningham answered.

"This is Van Dusen," the scientist told him. "I should like to know if any murder or attempted murder has been reported to the police tonight?"

"No," replied the detective. "Why?"

"I was afraid not," mused The Thinking Machine enigmatically. "Has there been any call for police assistance anywhere?"

"No."

"Between one and two o'clock tonight?" insisted the scientist.

"There hasn't been a call tonight," was the reply. "What's it all about?"

"I don't know—yet," said the scientist. "Good night."

The Thinking Machine went out after a few minutes, pausing on

the curb in the brilliant glare of a street lamp to jot down a number on his cuff. When he looked up, a cab was just passing. He hailed it, gave an address to the driver, and a moment later the vehicle went clattering down the street. When it stopped at last before a dark, four-story house, the cabman sat still for a moment expecting his passenger to alight. But nothing happened; so he jumped down and peered into the gloom of the vehicle. Dimly he was able to make out the small figure of the scientist huddled up in a corner of the cab with his huge yellow head thrown back, and slender white fingers pressed tip to tip.

"Here we are, sir," announced the driver.

"Yes, yes, to be sure!" exclaimed the scientist hurriedly. "I quite forgot. You needn't wait."

The vehicle was driven off as The Thinking Machine ascended the brown stone steps of the house and pulled the bell. There was no answer, no sound inside, and he pulled it the second time, then the third. Finally, leaning forward with his ear pressed against the door, he pulled the bell the fourth time. This evidently convinced him that the cord inside was disconnected, and he tried the door. It was locked.

Without an instant's hesitation he ran down the steps to the basement entrance in an areaway. There was no bell there, and he tried the knob tentatively. It turned, and he stepped into a damp, smelly hallway, unrelieved by one glint of light. He closed the door noiselessly behind him, and stood for a little while listening. Then he did a peculiar thing. He produced a small electric pocket lamp, and holding it as far to the left as he could reach, with the lens pointing ahead of him, pressed the button. A single white ray cleft the darkness, revealing a bare, littered floor, moldy walls, a couple of doors, and stairs leading up.

He spent perhaps five cautious minutes in the basement. There was no sign of recent human habitation, nothing but accumulated litter, and dust and dirt. Then he went up the stairs to the floor above. Here he spent another five minutes, with only an occasional flash of light, always at arm's length to extreme right or left, to tell him there was yet no sign of occupancy. Then another flight of stairs to the second floor. Still there was no sound, no trace of anyone, no indication of a living thing.

His first glimpse of the third floor confirmed at first glance all those impressions of desertion he had gathered below. The front room was identical with the one below, the front hall room was identical; but there was a difference in the large rear room. The dust and litter of the floor seemed worn into a sort of path from



the top of the stairs, and following this path back toward the back he came upon—a telephone!

"Forty-one-seventeen," he read, as the instrument stood revealed, bathed in the light from the electric bulb. Then he glanced down at his cuff and repeated, "Forty-one-seventeen."

With every sense alert for one disturbing sound, he spent two full minutes examining the instrument. He seemed to be seeking some mark upon it,—the scar of a bullet, perhaps—and as the scrutiny continued fruitless, the tiny wrinkles, which had momentarily disappeared from his face, appeared there again, and deepened perceptibly. The receiver was on the hook, the transmitter seemed to be in perfect condition, and the walls round the box were smooth. Finally he allowed the light to face, then picked up the receiver and held it to his ear. His sensitive fingers instantly became aware of tiny particles of dust on the smooth black surface; and the line was dead. Central did not answer. Yet this was the telephone from which he had been called!

Again he examined the instrument under the light, with something akin to perplexity on his drawn face; then allowed his eyes to follow the silken wire as it led up, across the room, and out the window. Did it go up or down? Probably up, possibly down. He had just taken two steps toward that window, with the purpose of answering this question definitely, when he heard a sound somewhere off in the house and stopped.

The light faded, and utter gloom swooped down upon him as he listened. What he heard apparently was the tread of feet at a distance, somewhere below. They seemed to be approaching. Now they were in the lower hall, and grew clatteringly distinct in the emptiness of the house; then the tread sounded on the stairs, the certain, quick step of one who knew his way perfectly. Now the sound was at the door—now finally in the room. Yet there was not one ray of light.

For a little time The Thinking Machine stood motionless, invisible in the enshrouding darkness, until the footsteps seemed almost upon him. Then suddenly his right arm was extended full length from his body, the electric bulb blazed in his hand, and slashed around the room. By every evidence of the sense of sound the flash should have revealed something—perhaps the figure of a man. But there was nothing! The room was vacant, save for himself. And even while the light flared he heard the steps again. The light went out, he took four quick, noiseless steps to his left, and stood there for a moment puzzled.

Then he understood. The mysterious tread was stilled now, as if

the person had stopped, and it remained still for several minutes. The Thinking Machine crept silently, cautiously, toward the door and stepped out into the hall. Leaning over the stair rail, he listened. And after a while the tread sounded again. He drew back into the shadow of a linen closet as the sound grew nearer—stood stock-still staring into blank nothingness as it was almost upon him; then the footsteps receded gradually along the hall, down the stairs, growing fainter, until the receding echo was lost in the silence of the night.

Whereupon The Thinking Machine went boldly up the stairs to the fourth floor, the top. He mounted confidently, as if expecting something to reward his scrutiny; but his eyes rested only upon the bleak desolation of unoccupied apartments. He went straight to the rear room, above the one he had just left, and directly across to one of the windows. Faint, rosy streaks of dawn slashed the east—just enough natural light to show dimly a silken wire hanging down from the middle of the window outside. He opened the window, drew in the wire, and examined it carefully under the electric light, and nodded as if he understood.

Finally he turned abruptly and retraced his steps to the first floor. There he paused to examine the knob of the front door; then went on down into the basement. Instead of examining the door there, however, he turned back under the stairs. There he found another door—a door to the subcellar, standing open a scant few inches. A damp, moldy smell came up. After a moment he pushed the door open slowly and ventured one foot forward in the darkness. It found a step, and he began to descend. The fourth step down creaked suddenly, and he paused to listen intently. Utter silence!

Then on down, ten, eleven, twelve, fourteen steps, and his foot struck soft, yielding earth. Safely on the ground again, in the protecting gloom, he stood still for a long time, peering blindly around him. At last a blaze of light leaped from the electric bulb, which was extended far from the body to the right, and The Thinking Machine drew a quick breath. It might have been surprise; for within the glow of the light lay the figure of a young man, a boy almost, flat on his back on the muddy earth, with eyes blinking in the glare. His feet were bound together with a rope, and his hands were evidently fastened behind him.

"Are you the gentleman who telephoned for me?" inquired The Thinking Machine calmly.

There was no answer, and yet the prostrate man was fully conscious, as proved by the moving eyes and a twitching of his limbs.

"Well?" demanded the scientist impatiently. "Can't you talk?"

His answer was a flash of flame, the crash of a revolver at short range, and the light dropped, automatically extinguished as the pressure on the button was removed. Upon this came the sound of a body falling. There was a long drawn gasp, and again silence.

"For God's sake, Cranston!" came the explosive voice of a man after a moment. "You've killed him!"

"Well, I'm not in this game to spend the rest of my life in jail," was the answer, almost a snarl. "I didn't want to kill anybody; but if I had to, all right. If it hadn't been for this kid here, we'd have been all right anyway. I've got a good mind to give him one too, while I'm at it!"

"Well, why don't you?" came a third voice. It was taunting, cold, unafraid.

"Oh, shut up!"

Feet moved uncertainly, feelingly, over the soft earth and stumbled upon the inert, limp figure of The Thinking Machine, lying face down on the ground, almost at the feet of the bound man. One of the men who had spoken stooped, and his fingers touched the still, slim body. He withdrew his hands quickly.

"Is he dead?" someone asked.

"My God, man! Why did you do it?" exclaimed the man who had spoken first, and there was a passionate undertone in his voice. "I never dreamed that this thing would lead to—to murder!"

"It hardly seems to be a time to debate why I did it," was the brutal response, "so much as it is to decide what we'll do now that it is done. We might drop this body in the coal bin in the basement until we finish up here; but what shall we do with the boy? We are both guilty—he saw it. He wanted to tell the other. What will he do now?"

"He'll tell it just so surely as he lives," the bound man answered for himself.

"In that case there's only one thing to do," declared Cranston flatly. "We'd better make a double job of this, leave them both here, and get away."

"Don't kill me—don't kill me!" whined the young man suddenly. "I won't ever tell—I promise! Don't kill me!"

"Oh, shut up!" snarled Cranston. "We'll attend to you later. Got a match?"

"Don't strike a light," commanded the other man sharply, fearfully. "No, don't! Why, man, suppose—suppose your shot had struck him in—in the face. God!"

"Well, help me lift it," asked Cranston shortly.

And between them they carried the child-like body of the emi-

ment man of science through the darkness to the stairs, up the stairs and through the basement to the back. The dawn was growing now, and the pallid, drawn face of The Thinking Machine was dimly visible by a light from the window. The eyes were wide open, glassy; the mouth agape slightly. Overcome by a newborn terror—hideous fear—the two men flung the body brutally into an open coal bin, slammed down the cover, and went stumbling, clattering, out of the room.

It was something less than half an hour later that the lid of the coal bin was raised from inside, and The Thinking Machine clambered out. He paused for a moment, to rub his knees and elbows ruefully and stretch his cramped limbs.

"Dear me! Dear me!" he grumbled to himself. "I really must be more careful."

And then straight back to the entrance of the subcellar he went. It was lighter outside now, and he walked with the assurance of one who saw where he went, yet noiselessly. But the door of the stairs leading down still revealed only a yawning black hole. He went on without the slightest hesitation, remembering to step over the fourth step, which had squeaked once before. In the gloom below, standing on the earth again, he listened for many minutes.

Assured at last that he was alone, he groped about the floor for his electric light, and finally found it. Without fear or apparent caution he examined the huge, dark, damp room. On each side were thrown up banks of dirt that seemed to have been dug recently, and here before him was where the bound man had lain. And over there—he started forward eagerly when he saw it—was a telephone! The transmitter box had been wrecked by what seemed to be a bullet. As he saw it he nodded his head comprehendingly.

From there he went on around some masonry. Here was a passage of some sort. He flashed the light into it. It had been dug out of the solid earth, and its existence evidently accounted for the heaps of dirt in the subcellar. Still he didn't hesitate. Straight along the passage he went, wary of step, and stooping occasionally to avoid striking his head against the earth above him. Ten, fifteen, twenty feet he went, and still the gloomy, foul-smelling hole lay ahead of him, leading to—what? At about thirty-five feet from the subcellar there was a sharp turn—he thought at first it was the end of the tunnel—then the passage straightened out again, and there was another fifteen or twenty feet, growing smaller and smaller as he went forward.

Suddenly the tunnel stopped. The Thinking Machine found

himself flattening his nose against a door of some sort. He allowed his light to fade, then dimly, through a cranny, he saw a faint glow outside. This seemed to be his destination, wherever it was—and he paused thoughtfully. Obviously the light outside was electric, and if electric light, might not someone be in there? A subterranean chamber of some sort, perhaps? His fingers ran around the edge of the door, loosened a fastening, and he peered out. Then, assured again, he opened the door wide, and stepped out into a brilliant glare.

He was in the subway. He stood blinking incredulously. Here to his right the shining rails went winding off round a curve in the far distance; and to the left was a quicker turn in the line of the excavation. In neither direction was there anything that looked like a station.

"Really, this is most extraordinary!" he exclaimed.

Then and there the eminent man of science paused to consider this weird thing from all possible viewpoints. It was unbelievable, positively nightmarish; yet true enough, for here he stood in the subway. There was no question about that; for in the distance was the roar of a train, and he discreetly withdrew into the little door, closing it carefully behind him until it had passed.

Finally he popped up again, closed the door behind him, paused only to admire the skill with which a portion of the tiling in the tunnel had been utilized as a door, then went on across the tracks. It was still early morning; the trains were as yet few and far between; so he had a little leisure for the minute examination he made of the tiled walls opposite the closed door. It was perhaps ten minutes before he found a tile that was loose. He hauled at it until it came out in his hand, revealing a dark aperture beyond.

Within fifteen minutes, therefore, from the time he undertook the search for the second door he was standing in another narrow, earthy tunnel which beckoned him on. With the ever-ready light to guide him, and still proceeding with caution, he advanced for possibly thirty feet; then came a turn. Round the turn he found himself in a sort of room—another cellar, perhaps. He permitted his light to go out, and stood listening, straining his squint eyes. After a time he was satisfied and flashed his light again.

Directly before him were half a dozen rough steps, leading up to what seemed to be a trap door. He had barely time to notice this and to see that the trap door was hanging open, when there came a cyclonic rush toward him out of the darkness, from the direction of his right, something whizzed past his head, causing him to drop the precious light, and instinctively he ran up the

steps. The gloom above was no more dangerous, he thought, than the gloom below, and he went on, finally passing through the trap and standing on a hard floor above.

There was the sound of a fierce, desperate struggle down there somewhere, cursing, blasphemy, then the noise of feet on the steps coming toward him, and the trap door closed with the heavy, resonant clang of iron. He was alone, his light lost. A sudden strange, awful silence closed down around him, a silence alive with suggestion of unseen, unknown dangers. He stood for a moment, then sank down upon the floor wearily.

Cashier Randall stood beside the ponderous door of the vault, watch in hand. It was two minutes of ten o'clock. At precisely ten the time lock on the massive steel structure, built into the solid masonry of the bank, would bring the mechanism into position for the combination to work. Already the various clerks and tellers were at their posts; books and money were in the vault. At length there came a whir and a sharp click in the heavy door, and the cashier whirled the combination. A few minutes later he pulled open the outer door with a perceptible effort, then turned his attention to the combination lock on the second door. This yielded more readily; but there was still another door, the third to be unlocked. Altogether the task of opening the huge vault required something like six minutes.

Finally Cashier Randall threw open the light third door, then touched an electric button to his right. Instantly the gloom of the structure was dispelled by a flood of light, and he started back in amazement. Almost at his feet, on the floor of the vault, was the huddled figure of a man. Dead? Or unconscious? Certainly there was no movement to indicate life, and the cashier stepped backward into the office with blanched face.

Others came crowding round and saw, and startled glances were exchanged.

"You, Carroll and Young, lift him out, please," requested the cashier quietly. "Don't make any noise about it. Take him to my office."

The order was obeyed in silence. Then Cashier Randall in person went into the vault and ran hurriedly through the piles of money which lay there. He came out at last and spoke to one of the paying tellers:

"The money is all right," he said, with a relieved expression in his face. "Have it all counted carefully, please, and report to me."

He retired into his private office and closed the door behind him. Carroll and Young stood staring down curiously at the man

who now lay stretched full length on the couch. They looked at the cashier inquiringly.

"I think it's a matter for the police," continued the cashier after a moment and he picked up the receiver of the telephone.

"But how—how did he get in the vault?" stammered Carroll.

"I don't know. Hello! Police headquarters, please."

"Anything missing, sir?" inquired Young.

"Not so far as we know," was the reply. "Don't make any excitement about it, please. He is breathing yet, isn't he?"

"Yes," answered Carroll. "He doesn't seem to be hurt—just unconscious."

"Lack of air," said the cashier. "He must have been in there all night. It's enough to kill him. Hello! I want to speak to the chief of detectives. Mr. Mallory, yes. This is the Grandison National Bank, Mr. Mallory. Can you come down at once, please, and investigate a matter of great importance?"

Fifteen minutes later Detective Mallory walked into the cashier's private office. Instantly his eyes fell upon the recumbent figure on the couch, and there came with the glimpse a strange, startled expression.

"Well, for—" he blurted. "Where did you get hold of him?"

"I found him in the vault just now when I opened it," was the reply. "Do you know him?"

"Know him?" bellowed Detective Mallory. "Know him? Why it's Professor Van Dusen, a distinguished scientist. He's the fellow they call The Thinking Machine sometimes." He paused incredulously. "Have you sent for a doctor? Well, send for one quick!"

With the tender care of a mother for her child the detective hovered about the couch whereon The Thinking Machine lay, having first opened the window, and pausing now and then to swear roundly at the physician's delay in arriving. And at last the doctor came. Quick restoratives brought the scientist to consciousness within a few minutes.

"Ah, Mr. Mallory!" he remarked weakly. "Please have the doors locked, and put somebody you can trust on guard. Don't let anyone out. I'll explain in a minute or so."

The detective rushed out of the room, returning a moment later. He found The Thinking Machine talking to the cashier.

"Have you a man named Cranston employed here in the bank?"

"Yes," replied the cashier.

"Arrest him, Mr. Mallory," directed The Thinking Machine. "Doctor, just the least bit of nitroglycerin, please, in my left arm, here. And, also, Mr. Mallory, arrest any particular chum of this



man Cranston; also a young man, almost a boy, possibly employed here—probably a relative or closely connected with Cranston's chum. That will do, doctor. Thanks! Anything stolen?"

The detective glanced inquiringly at the cashier.

"No," replied that official.

The Thinking Machine dropped back on the couch, closed his eyes, and lay silent for a moment.

"Pretty bad pulse, doctor," he remarked at last. "Charge your hypodermic again. What bank is this, Mr. Mallory?"

"Grandison National," the detective informed him. "What happened to you? How did it come you were in the vault?"

"It was awful, Mr. Mallory—awful, believe me!" was the reply. "I'll tell you about it after a while. Meanwhile, be sure to get Cranston and——"

And he fainted.

Twenty-four hours' rest in his own home, under the watchful eye of a physician, restored The Thinking Machine to a physical condition almost normal. But the whys and wherefores of his mysterious presence in the vault of the bank were still matters of eager speculation, but speculation only, to both the police and the bank officials. His last words, before being removed to his own apartments, had been a warning against the further use of the vault; but no explanation accompanied it.

Meanwhile Detective Mallory and his men rounded up three prisoners—Harry Cranston, a middle-aged and long trusted employee of the bank; David Ellis Burge, a young mechanical engineer with whom Cranston had been upon terms of great intimacy for many months; and Richard Folsom, a stalwart young nephew of Burge's, himself a student of mechanical engineering. They were held upon charges born in the fertile mind of Detective Mallory, carefully isolated from one another and from the outside.

The Thinking Machine told his story in detail, incident by incident, from the moment of the telephone call until the trap door closed behind him and he found himself in the vault of a bank. His listeners, Detective Mallory, President Hall, and Cashier Randall of the Grandison National, and Hutchinson Hatch, reporter, absorbed in utter amazement.

"Certainly it was the most elusive problem that has ever come under my observation," declared the diminutive man of science. "It was so elusive, so compelling, that I indiscreetly placed my life in danger twice, and I didn't know definitely what it all meant until I knew I was in the vault. No man may know that slow suffocation, that hid-

eous gasping for breath as minute after minute went by, unless he has felt it. And, gentlemen, if I had been killed, one of the most valuable minds in the sciences would have been lost. It would have been nothing less than a catastrophe." He paused and settled back into that position which was so familiar to at least two of his hearers.

"When I got the telephone call," he resumed after a moment, "it told me several things beyond the obvious. The logic of it all—and logic, gentlemen, is incontrovertible—was that some man was in danger, in danger even as he talked to me, that he had tried to reach me, seeking help, that the first interruption on the wire came because perhaps he was being choked, and that the second came—the shot which wrecked the instrument—as a desperate expedient to prevent further conversation. The scene was quite clear in my mind.

"The wire was dead then. Central didn't know the number. There was no way to get that number save by the tedious process of testing the wires in the exchange, and that might have taken days. It took only two hours or so, fortunately; but I got the number at last from which I was called; that is, I got a wire which was inexplicably dead, and assumed the rest. The number of that wire was forty-one-seventeen. The records showed the street and number of the house where it came from. Therefore I went there. Before I went I took the precaution of calling up police headquarters to see if any report of a murder or attempted murder or anything unusual had come in. Nothing had come in. This fact in itself was elucidating, because vaguely it indicated that I had been called, rather than the police, because—well, perhaps because it was not desirable for the police to know.

"Well, as I explained, I searched the house; and by the way, Mr. Mallory, I don't know if you know the advantages of always holding your dark lantern as far away from your body as possible when going into dangerous places; because if there is a danger, a shot, say, the natural impulse of the person who shoots is to aim at the light. Incidentally this precaution saved my life in the cellar, when I feigned death. But I'm going a little ahead of myself.

"I found telephone number forty-one-seventeen, and there was a heavy coat of dust on the receiver. Obviously it had not been recently used. The line was dead, it is true, but the instrument was in perfect condition. There was no sign of a bullet mark anywhere round or near it. If the bullet that was fired had killed the man who had been using the line, it would not have deadened the wire; therefore instantly I saw that the line had been tapped somewhere; that this instrument had been cut off from it, and the instrument which was demolished was the one on the branch wire.

"I knew this, and was going to the window to see if the wire led up or down, when I heard someone approaching. I first supposed that the person, whoever it was, was in the room with me, the steps were so distinct; but when I flashed the light, intending at least to see him, I knew he was above me. One loses the sense of direction of sound, particularly in the dark; and it is an incontestable fact that footsteps, or any sound above, can be heard more clearly than the same sound below. Therefore I knew that someone was in the room above me. For what purpose? Possibly to disconnect the branch wire on the telephone line.

"I waited until the person, whoever it was, came down and went his way; then I found the wire, and saw where the connection had been made on it. Then I went straight down to the subcellar. There I saw this Folsom lying on the ground, bound. He was not gagged; yet he didn't answer my questions; obviously because he knew if he did he would place himself in danger. The shot was fired at me, or rather at my light, and I went through the farce which ultimately placed me in a coal bin. Then I began to get a definite idea of things from the conversation, when Cranston's name was mentioned several times.

"Folsom persisted in an outspoken declaration to reveal everything he knew, including the story of my murder. He insisted until he placed himself in grave danger, and then, under cover of utter darkness, I extended one hand and pinched him twice on the ankle. He knew then that I was not dead, that I had heard, and did the very thing I wanted him to do—begged for his life. It was a bit of justifiable duplicity. I knew if he was the man his every act so far had indicated that he would humbug Cranston and the other man into letting him go, or at least not committing another murder. Subsequent developments showed that this conjecture was correct.

"From the coal bin I went back to the subcellar, knowing positively now that there would be no one there. Those men were frightened when they left me, and men run from fright. What they would do with young Folsom I didn't know. There, with my electric light, I found the branch telephone. The transmitter box had been ruined by a shot, as I imagined. So, thus far at least, the logic of the affair was taking me some place.

"And then I followed that tunnel through the subway into another tunnel. I should not have ventured into that second tunnel had I not been fairly confident that no one else was there. In that I was mistaken. I don't know now, but I imagine that young Folsom was temporarily being held prisoner there, and that possibly Cranston was on guard. Anyway, there was a fight, and the trap

door was open—the trap door into the vault. And I don't know yet whether Folsom and Cranston, if they were there, even knew I was at hand. Certainly the trap door, once closed behind me, was not opened again. And you know the rest of it." Again there was a pause, and the scientist twiddled his fingers idly.

"Now it all comes down to this," he concluded at last. "Cranston dragged Burge into the affair—Burge is a mechanical engineer, and a good one was needed to do this work—they rented the house, and went to work. It took weeks, perhaps months, to do it all. Folsom in some way learned of it, and he is an honest man. He took a desperate means of getting the information into my hands, instead of the hands of the police. Why the telephone was in the house I don't know—perhaps it was already there; perhaps they had it put in. Anyway, of your prisoners, Mr. Mallory, this young Folsom is guilty only of an attempt to shield his uncle, Burge, while Cranston is the ringleader, and Burge the man who achieved the immense task of getting under the vault of the bank.

"This vault has a floor of cement, cut into small squares. The trap door is in that floor, and so perfectly concealed in the lines of the squares that it is invisible unless submitted to a close scrutiny, just as the doors in the tiled walls of the subway were invisible to a casual observer. They overcame tremendous difficulties, these two men, in cutting through the immense foundation of the vault, even the steel itself, but remember that they worked at night for weeks and weeks, and were making no mistakes. They did not actually rob the bank because, I imagine, they were awaiting the deposit there of some immense sum. Is that correct, Mr. Hall?"

President Hall started suddenly. "Yes, in a week or so we were expecting a shipment of gold from Europe—nearly three million dollars," he exclaimed. "Think of it!"

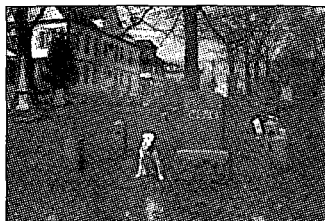
Detective Mallory whistled. "Phew! What a haul it would have been!"

"Now, Mr. Mallory, either of these three men, if properly approached, will confess the whole thing substantially as I have told it," remarked The Thinking Machine. "But I would advise that Folsom be allowed to go. He is really a very decent sort of young man."

When they had all gone except Hatch, the eminent man of science went over and laid one hand upon the reporter's shoulder and squinted straight into his eyes for a moment. "You know, Mr. Hatch," he said, and there was a strange note in the irritable voice, "my first fear, when the telephone call came, was that it was you. You must be careful—very careful, always." 🦋

# THE STORY THAT WON

The May Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Jim Reed of Windermere, Florida. Honorable mentions go to Jeffrey W. Doak of Phoenix, Arizona; Victor P. Dufault of Noank, Connecticut; Marc Nelson of Kansas City, Missouri; Diane Coutr  of Santa Monica, California; Richard Howard of Conway, Arkansas; Jose Roberto of El Cajon, California; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Jan Streilein of Aiken, South Carolina; and John Thomen of Katy, Texas.



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## BURIED TREASURE

JIM REED

“**W**e’re going to do what?” Bogart asked.

“We’re going to go in like we own the place and start digging,” Cliff said.

“Okay, but I think you’re losing your mind. Broad daylight and everything.”

Bogart and Cliff feigned nonchalance and strolled into the cemetery. Cliff paused and pointed.

“Right here,” he said. “Right here’s where Clay said he buried the treasure. Right by this old tombstone.”

Bogart was hesitant. “This is a dumb place to bury anything except a body.”

“Yeah, that’s what’s beautiful about it. There’s always someone digging around in here. Clay figured it wouldn’t arouse any suspicion when he came back for it. Too bad he won’t be able to enjoy it.”

“Yeah, too bad. What happened to Clay, anyway?”

“We were in the pen together. He got talkative one night and told me about the heist. When I escaped, he insisted on coming with me. He got shot going over the wall.”

“Ouch.” Bogart looked down. “Start digging?” he asked.

A loud voice disturbed them. “What do you two think you’re doing?” It was the neighborhood beat cop. Bogart ran, escaping through the gap in the fence, but Cliff was paralyzed with fear. *Oh no, not now! So close to the treasure!*

The policeman walked up to Cliff, slapping his billy club in the palm of his hand. “I’m asking again: what are you doing in here?” The cop glared at him.

“Woof,” was all Cliff could think to say.

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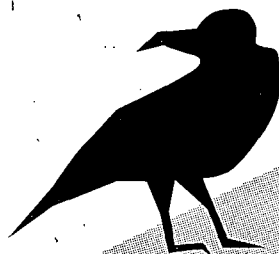
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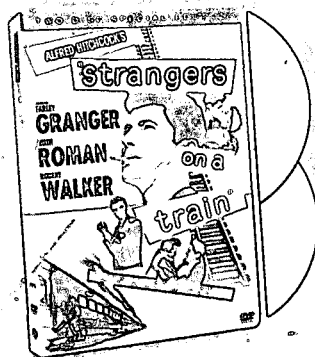
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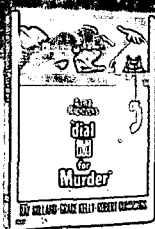
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